

Under the Covers by ToAStranger

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Gen, M/M

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Max Hargrove, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers, assorted other characters

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Steve Harrington, Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Jonathan Byers & Steve Harrington & Nancy Wheeler

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Summary:

Steve is (maybe) a little bit still in love with Nancy Wheeler and (maybe) trying to figure himself out-- between the night terrors and the babysitting and the general weirdness that is Hawkins, Indiana-- before he graduates.

Billy Hargrove fits in there somewhere (probably).

1. longing (for some solitary company)

Author's Note:

May add additional tags as necessary. Should be twelve chapters total. Got a pretty loose idea; we'll see if it comes together that way.

Bonus points to whoever figures out each song for each chapter and why I picked them.

It's one of those weird winter mornings at the end of January, where the sky is blue and the sun is a warm blessing on your face, but you still had to wear five layers, had to wait ten minutes before driving anywhere for your windows to defrost, and had to bury deep into the scarf around your neck to keep your nose from freezing off walking from the parking lot to the school's front entrance. Steve has his hands curled deep into the pockets of a coat from three years ago-- all garish pink and blue and purple-- but it's down and keeps him from freezing the moment he steps out of the heat of his Beamer.

He feels a bit like an overstuffed marshmallow as he rocks in place next to the driver's side door, hunching his shoulders up and hiding his frostbitten cheeks beneath the high buttoned collar of his, admittedly, ridiculous jacket as he waits for Jonathan's old beater to putter up next to his car. There's steam from the exhaust still billowing out of the rear as he pulls into park, Nancy climbing out to offer a smile, and Steve risks his fingers to reply with a quick wave. She looks lovely and a bit flush in her knitted cap, hair tucked up beneath it, making her look a bit more like a pixie than usual, eyes big and smile bright. Everytime he sees her, even bundled up and frumpy in her winter gear, boots crunching in the ice still gathered on the ground, he remembers why he loves her.

Then Jonathan steps out and Steve idles over, hovering a few paces away. "Morning," he mutters.

"Hey," he says, smile still tentative but increasingly more ready each morning that Steve waits out for them. "Didn't see you at the middle school today."

"Yeah," Steve bobs his head as they begin to file toward the school, Nancy falling to step alongside Jonathan, slightly behind Steve, a wordless agreement to get inside and get warm as quickly as possible. "Dustin had an orthodontic appointment this morning. Mrs. H said she'd bring him in after."

"Ah," Jonathan nods, eyeing Steve from the side and Steve's already rolling his eyes before he even catches the way Nancy's lips have pressed thin the way they do when she's trying not to laugh. "Nice, uh, jacket?"

"It's fucking cold as shit, Byers." Steve grunts. "Judge me all you want, but at least I'm not gonna die of hypothermia."

"No, no uh-- that wasn't--" Jonathan's throat works as they step into the hall, shouldering through the door, his face burning. "I just mean, it's a really nice--"

"Hey, Harrington!" Tommy calls, the second they step inside, lingering like a bad smell by his locker with Carol plastered to one side and Billy Hargrove pointedly *not* looking their way at his other. "Nice coat. Very preppy chic. Is it your mom's?"

"*Your* mom's, actually." Steve says without really even looking their way, eyes wrinkling at the edges as he catches sight of Nancy covering her mouth with a mitten and Jonathan ducking his head to laugh. "Tell her I said thanks, would you? For last night, too?"

There's the sharp sound of a locker slamming shut, the hushed murmur of Carol calming Tommy down before he can start anything *before first period even starts, what the fuck, Tommy*, and a rough snort that has Steve glancing over with his brows high as they walk by. Billy's staring at him as he goes, mouth twisted up in one of those grins that would've promised something sharp, something biting, not six months before.

He doesn't say anything, but Steve knows he wants to. Can see it in the way the heel of his boot taps against the linoleum floor, in the way he tongues the inside of his right cheek, eyeing Steve like he's a joke-- but a surprising and sometimes impressive one. Like he gets just as much glee out of watching Steve *not care* as he did when Steve

had cared *a little too much* about losing his status, about losing his loser friends, about getting swept under the rug and forgotten before Steve had realized he doesn't give a shit if any of his little shithead peers gives a fuck about him.

But he doesn't say anything and neither does Steve and they drift by each other without words, but Steve knows that this show of fire so early in the morning will get his ass handed to him later at practice.

It's the only place Billy doesn't hold back these days, after that November night where he beat Steve's face in and Steve had nearly let a bunch of thirteen year olds die on his watch before they saved the world. He's still generally a dick in Steve's general direction, but it doesn't burn him or rub him raw the way it did in the beginning.

Steve's not really sure if it's because Max had-- in Dustin's words-- *nearly fucking nailed Billy's balls to the floor, oh my god, man, it was amazing and terrifying and did I mention amazing?* and Billy's cranked it down under threat of a repeat performance, or if it's because what insults that come Steve's way tend to slide off like water after the whole *saved the world* business.

Nightmares about demogorgons and demodogs and massive ghastly smoke monsters tend to be more impacting than an asshole in tight jeans these days.

Either way, the moment passes, and then Steve is shoving his shit into his locker while Nancy prattles on about some history test on Friday, and Jonathan hovers, giving him a look that has Steve hiding a smile into his open locker because he's worn that face more than once when Nancy starts to go on about school the way she does. It comes with a pang of regret and maybe a bit of bitterness, but he swallows it down because Nancy may be his ex and he may still love her in one way or another but she's happy with Jonathan, and Jonathan is his friend now too.

"See you guys at lunch?" he asks as he shuts his locker door, gaudy jacket hung over his arm and smile a bit tight; but they both nod and smile back before parting ways.

As the day passes, the sky grows dark, weighed down by thick clouds

that threaten cold, wet sleet more than they do a fresh snowfall, and Steve grimaces up at them during his English class where he's sat on the far side of the room next to the windows. He keeps tapping his pencil against the old wood of his desk, definitely not listening to whatever it is the teacher is talking about, right up until she calls on him from the front of the room.

He sits up from his slump, lips parting, and he clears his throat as a few classmates twist around to look at him as he asks her to repeat the question.

"*Jane Eyre*, Mr. Harrington." She says, not unkindly, but in that tired way teachers sometimes get as she gestures to the windows with a hand. "If you could get your head out of the clouds, I'd like your thoughts."

"On... the book, or...?"

"Sure," Ms. Klein nods, sitting back against the edge of her desk, crossing her arms over her chest, and Steve recalls a time sophomore year when he'd had a crush on her-- tall, blonde, and always wearing the stupidest sweaters he'd ever seen-- right up until she'd sat him down after turning in another laughable essay and said she expected better of him. "The book, the characters, the theme. Just... contribute to the discussion, perhaps?"

"Right, yeah." Steve huffs, flipping through the book and then clearing his throat again as he shifts in his seat. "I guess it's... I mean, it's interesting? There's this girl--"

"Jane."

--right, Jane, who is-- is abused and alone, but... I dunno. She's nice? Or-- Or maybe *kind* is a better word?" Steve shrugs. "But she just... I guess she seems kinda lonely. To me. Or something."

Ms. Klein blinks, but then her smile is one of those blinding ones, her cheek dimpling as she nods. Steve's had that smile directed at him only one other time, when he'd come to her for help with his personal essay after breaking up with Nancy.

“Good, Mr. Harrington. Anyone want to help him with the phrasing? Jane’s loneliness, even at Thornfield Hall, speaks to what theme?” Ms. Klein rounds her desk, plucking up the chalk as she talks over her shoulder. “Come on, we’ve been talking about theme all year. What’s the--?”

“Isolation,” Billy says, somewhere behind Steve and toward the opposite corner, and Steve twists around to look at where he’s doodling on his desk and not looking up. “She’s isolated. Emotionally, physically, whatever. She’s isolated. Always.”

“Very good, Mr. Hargrove.” Ms. Klein scrawls the word across the board, dusting her hands off with a delighted air of triumph. “Isolation. Let’s talk about that.”

Steve doesn’t see Jonathan or Nancy at lunch. It’s not too unusual for one of their plans to change, so Steve bites into an apple, elbows on the table in the half-empty library, and works on the math homework he didn’t finish the night before.

He doesn’t think about where Nancy and Jonathan are or what they could be doing. He doesn’t stare at problem eleven for ten minutes, eyes stuck on the words forming the equation about the cost of electricity during summer and winter, thinking about the Byers’ house strung up in Christmas lights. He doesn’t think about the weight of a bat in his hands, or the stink of monster in his nose, or the shadows that move, or the fact that he really wishes Nancy and Jonathan were sitting there with him.

He doesn’t think about any of that. Not at all.

It’s raining, just like Steve thought it would, all disgusting and half-frozen and wet, by the time practice is over. He’s out of breath, shirt clinging to his chest, and his coach is yelling a reminder about the last game next Saturday as they all file into the locker room. Tommy checks into him on his way by, headed toward the showers, and Steve snorts to himself with a shake of his head.

He foregoes the shower-- doesn't want his hair freezing on the way out to his car-- stripping as the rest of the team heads into the steam.

He's sore, aching a bit, but in a way that's *good* . His head had been on the court today, on the ball, and not on any of the soft smiles Nancy hasn't been directing his way, or the fact that he knows he's going to go home to find a note from his parents on the kitchen counter, or the dark tunnels that are still under the town. So when Billy pulls his shirt on, black and cotton and just as stupidly tight as his stupidly tight jeans, and says "good job today, Harrington," Steve just nods.

"Yeah, thanks."

"Didn't eat shit once," Billy adds. "I'm impressed."

"Yeah. Maybe all those hits finally knocked some sense into me," Steve says, scrubbing a hand through his hair, and he turns, startled as Billy looks, at the laugh it earns.

"Maybe," Billy nods, brows pinched, eyes on Steve's face like he's looking for evidence from a fight that's two months too old. "Keep playing like that and we might actually get somewhere besides the losers' bracket this season."

Steve's nose scrunches as he plops down to tug on his winter boots, discarding his sneakers. "We came in second for the county last year."

Billy hums, shrugging a leather coat on and placing an unlit cigarette between his lips, sweat still clinging to him just as bad as it's clinging to Steve. "Maybe this time we'll come in first."

"Maybe," Steve says, hesitating before shoving to his feet, gathering up this things. "Anyway, I gotta-- well, AV club is gonna be over soon, so..."

"The rugrats," Billy nods. "Right."

It's a weird thing they've all got in common. Steve and Billy and Jonathan, picking up their respective preteens during the colder of the winter months, when their parents refuse to let them bike their

way through the snow. Sometimes Steve ends up picking up for Jonathan, and on rare occasions, he picks up for Billy. Steve's just waiting for the day they add Eleven to the mix and Hopper's truck joins the odd line of teenagers in their cars.

He offers Billy a little two fingered salute as he steps away, smile more a grimace than anything else, and stops when Billy calls out to him. He half turns, stopped in the doorway, ugly jacket half on, and Billy eyes the thing with a crooked smile.

"I forgot to mention," he says. "Dig the coat. Very you."

"Original, Hargrove." Steve's tone is dry; his expression dryer. "Real original. Have fun freezing your ass off."

He hears Billy cackle as he goes and doesn't have a chance to feel irritated by it, too busy running through the sleet to be worried about much else.

It's when he's in his car later, having dropped Dustin and Lucas off, that he lets the weight of the day finally settle into his shoulders.

He's tired, always kind of is these days when his nights are full of more restless turnings than actual rest, but today seemed to drag on more than usual.

He remembers seeing Jonathan and Nancy at the middle school, picking up Will and Mike. Remembers seeing Nancy's quick little smile, her wordless apology for missing lunch, but then Jonathan says something and she's looking away and the kids are climbing into the cars and they're all going their own way.

A year ago, he thinks that was him. Nancy and Steve, with Jonathan at the periphery, and monsters in their past.

Now, instead of going back to his place and inviting Nancy over because his parents aren't home again, he goes back to his place alone. He sits outside, in his car, engine chugging away and radio humming quiet, for a long time. Unwilling to step alone into that big, empty house. He watches the rain hit the windshield and knows

the roads will be extra slick tomorrow.

He thinks about going in, calling Nancy up, seeing if she'd be willing to come over and help him with his essay or help him study for a test he doesn't have. He knows he shouldn't, but on days like these, long and cold and lonely, it's harder for him to remember why he can't.

Before Nancy, he might've had Tommy over, or thrown a party, but that was before Nancy. And he thinks, maybe, that's one of the best things to come out of the entire disaster-- she may have broken his heart, but he thinks he's probably a little bit better for it.

He watches the rain fall, half-frozen and wet, and knows that tonight, after the sun has finally set, it will turn to snow.

2. I Lost Myself (In a Familiar Song)

Notes for the Chapter:

SO MUCH LOVE. I'M SO 'PRESSED. THANKS.

Also, check out this RAD AF fanart of Steve-o from the amazing @ningdom: <https://cdn.discordapp.com/attachments/223381052830384129/379809906397675520/windbreaker.png>

STEVE. IN HIS DUMB JACKET. I'M SO HAPPY.

Steve was right about the snow. Two days later, it still hasn't let up, blanketing the streets and muffling the entire town.

It's Friday and Steve's just pulled up to the high school. He's sitting in his car instead of waiting outside of it, a little early today, and the sky is so dark from the weight of the snow falling down that it's almost as if the sun hasn't risen at all. Steve sits, shivering in the driver's seat, staring out over the dash as the heat of the AC blasts against his face. *Old Time Rock and Roll* is playing low on his radio; he's waiting for Nancy. He can't stop looking out the window; at the sky, at the clouds, at the snow falling like ash--

Steve jumps, a startled sound catching in his throat, as Billy knocks against the glass of his passenger door. He's smoking, gloveless, and he shuffles outside, looking impatient.

Steve lurches over and unlocks the door, frowning as Billy ducks inside, shivering and getting snow all over the leather seat. "Jesus, m'fuckin' freezin' my balls off out there," he says and Steve waves his hand through the cloud of smoke that follows.

"You have your own car?" Steve frowns.

"Yeah, no, sorry." Billy grunts, twisting to face him. "Usually I'd just knock on the window, but it's colder than shit out there."

"Right," Steve says, slow like Billy's slow, brows going up and Billy

cuts to the chase before Steve has to ask him to.

“You’re picking up the brats today, right?” Billy asks, and Steve nods, so he presses on. “Figured maybe you could get Max, too. I’ll come get her from Wheeler’s at eight like usual, but I’ve got plans.”

“Plans,” Steve repeats, blinking a few times, and Billy scowls over at him and takes another drag.

“Yeah, you know, *plans* .”

“Oh,” Steve blinks again, and then shakes his head; this isn’t the first time Billy’s made a demand like this. “ *Oh* . Plans. Right. Yeah, I can pick her up.”

“Little slow on the uptake today, Harrington.” Billy mutters, still frowning at him. “Well, slower than usual. You feeling alright?”

“What, like you’re worried?” Steve asks, bristling, and Billy grins with all his teeth. “It’s fine. I’ll grab Max. They’re all coming over to my place tonight anyway.”

Billy’s smile drops. “Your place?”

“Don’t get your panties in a bunch. I offered to watch Dustin for Mrs. Henderson when she mentioned she had a, uh... *date* . Kid liked the idea of staying over so much he invited the rest of his little nerds and it turned into a thing. I’m just the chaperone.”

Eyes narrowing, Billy regards Steve like he’s hunting for some kind of lie or omission, but he must not find one on Steve’s forehead because he shrugs and pulls out the ashtray from Steve’s dash and stamps out his cigarette. “Whatever. You wanna play house with a bunch of thirteen year old losers, fine by me. But I better not show up at some shack of a place and find it covered in weird ass drawings again.”

“No promises,” Steve’s smile is a bitter little thing.

Billy snorts. “Right. Catch you later, Harrington.”

Steve watches him climb back out of his car, leaving the scent of cigarette smoke and whatever cologne he’s always wearing too much

of in his wake. By the time the door is shut and Billy's halfway to the school, Steve realizes that, while they were talking, Jonathan and Nancy had pulled up and were already nowhere to be seen.

With a heavy sigh, Steve kills the engine and pulls his jacket on tighter, stepping out into the cold and making the walk to the entrance by himself.

"Sorry for missing lunch the last couple of days," Nancy says when he finally sees them, four periods in, sitting at their usual table in the library. "Last minute cramming sessions for that American--"

--History test, yeah." Steve nods, waving a hand. "No big. I told you yesterday."

Nancy's lips press thin. "Right. Sorry."

Steve sighs.

"So, uh..." Jonathan clears his throat, and Steve wonders if he's ever not going to look like a skittish animal about to bolt everytime he has to start a conversation with him. "Do you-- I mean, are you gonna be okay tonight with the boys over?"

"You kidding?" Steve's brows fly up as he pulls out his lunch, taking a big bite out of a half-smooshed PB&J he'd thrown together that morning and talking around it. "Considering the crazy shit that's happened at my place, a half dozen little shits running around demanding pizza and rolling dice aren't gonna be that big of a deal."

Nancy's nose wrinkles up at him as he talks with his mouth half full, but she's biting back laughter again, and Steve beams lopsidedly at her. "We really appreciate it. You, picking up Will and Mike, I mean."

Steve swallows hard, smile faltering as his eyes dart between the two of them. "Yeah, y'know, that's me. Steve Harrington, babysitter extraordinaire. I can put that on a resume, can't I?"

With a huff of a laugh, Nancy nods. "Of course. Right next to

Demogorgon Slayer and Tom Cruise lookalike .”

“Aces,” Steve says, gaze straying down as he catches Jonathan giving Nancy one of those besotted looks he always does when he thinks she’s said something particularly clever. “So, you guys got any exciting plans for the evening off?”

“Actually, um... we’re gonna go see that new comedy at the Marquee.” Jonathan says.

Steve hums, noncommittal, and nods his head. “Sounds fun.”

“If you weren’t--” Nancy glances at Jonathan, and he swallows with a tight smile, like he isn’t gonna like what she’s about to say. “If you weren’t busy tonight, I would’ve-- we would’ve loved for you to come with us, but--”

“Hey, yeah, not a big deal at all.” Steve shakes his head, scooting back slightly, his stomach turning over at the mere suggestion. “Besides, wouldn’t want to interrupt date night.”

“Steve, you wouldn’t be--”

“Harrington!”

Nancy swallows whatever she was about to say, and Jonathan slumps next to her. She blinks her big eyes up at where Billy is being shushed by the librarian, and Steve twists around in his chair to catch sight of him waving the shrewd woman off and pacing over like a man on a mission.

He grabs the chair next to Steve, turning it around and taking a seat uninvited, arms crossing along the back with one of those sharp, close-lipped smiles that means he’s trying to be polite. He reaches out, snatching up the apple from Steve’s lunch and taking a noisy bite. So, as polite as Billy Hargrove can stand to be in a single moment.

“Can I help you?” Steve asks, leaning heavy on the elbow he’s got on the table, twisted slightly to face him.

“Forgot to ask,” Billy says around another bite, greeting Nancy and

Jonathan with an absent jerk of his chin. "What's your address? Kinda need that to pick up my shithead sister tonight."

"Um," Steve glances over at Nancy and she shrugs a shoulder, shaking her head, and when Steve looks back at Billy, he's looking at Steve with a brow up and a steady gaze that never once wavers even as Steve flusters slightly and digs around for a notebook and a pencil. "Right. Here."

"Thanks, pretty boy." Billy takes the scrap when Steve rips it out of the notebook for him, folding it up and tucking it into the pocket of his leather jacket, probably next to his smokes. "See you at practice," he shoves back to his feet and winks, tossing the apple back with a careless flick of his wrist, and Steve scrambles to catch it.

When he's gone, out of the library, and Steve's turned back around to Nancy and Jonathan, they're both looking at him like he's grown a second head.

"What?"

"Nothing," Nancy says quickly, hands fluttering. "That was just... it's always surprising when he's civil."

Jonathan nods his agreement.

Steve shrugs, eyeing the apple in his hand, shiny and green and missing a few bites. They're not wrong.

He's at the top of key, practicing free-throws, when Billy sidles up to him again. Steve doesn't look his way, counting between breaths and inhaling before he throws. The ball hits the rim, bounces, and falls out.

With a grimace, Steve catches the ball when his partner Danny passes it back, dribbling it a few times before doing it again.

Arms crossed over his chest, Billy hums. "You're shooting all wrong."

Steve falters, nearly getting smacked in the face when Danny tosses

the ball again, and he whips a look over at Billy. "Excuse me?"

"Hey, Dan, take a lap or sumthin'." Billy calls and Danny hesitates, glancing at Steve, who straightens and shakes his head. " *Dan* . A lap. Get going."

Danny seems to vacillate for only a second longer before rolling his eyes and taking off around the court with a few of their teammates. The breath whooshes out of Steve, and he looks at Billy, already dreading whatever *lesson* it is that Billy thinks Steve needs.

"Give me that," Billy holds out a hand.

Biting the inside of his cheek, Steve passes the ball with a bit too much force. Billy takes it, that infuriating smile on his face, and he tosses it lazily between his hands.

He tilts his head to the basket and Steve steps back, hands up in surrender. Behind them somewhere, he hears the coach blow his whistle to call an end to practice, calling for them to wrap it up.

"You're breathing in when you shoot. Watch." Billy takes aim, chest rising as he breathes in deep, and falling as he exhales and takes the shot.

It swoops through the net like it was nothing, bouncing off the court a few times.

Billy looks at Steve, brows up, like he's saying *see ?* and he jogs after the ball. Steve stands there, waiting, and catches it with a grunt when Billy passes the ball back hard.

"Try again," he says. "Breathe out when you take the shot. Not in."

Eyes narrowing, Steve spins the ball against his palm and dribbles it up and down a couple of times before squaring up, aiming, and measuring his breath in and out-- and then he shoots. The ball hits the back corner of the box, swirling around the rim, and then sinking into the net. Billy catches it, grinning, and he bounces it back to Steve.

Steve blinks, holding the ball between his hands, and he makes a

little *huh* sound before squaring up to do it again.

When, on the third and fourth shot, he makes it in without fail, he smiles big and bright and stupid over at Billy. “Thanks, man.”

Billy shrugs, dragging a hand through his hair. “A favor for a favor, Harrington. Don’t make anything big outta it.”

“Oh, trust me, I’m not going to.”

The coach blows his whistle again, startling them both. “Alright, ladies, get off the court! Some of us want to go home and start their goddamn weekend.”

“Sorry, coach.” Steve calls over his shoulder, and when he turns around again, Billy is right there taking the ball from him, still sweaty and shirtless and grinning. Steve steps back. “I should get going before those shitheads get a stupid idea like having another snowball fight while waiting.”

Billy makes a face, and Steve thinks maybe he put his foot in it like usual, but then he’s nodding and pacing with Steve toward the locker room. “Nearly fuckin’ took Max’s head off last time she got snow all over my ride.”

“That right?” he asks, dubious, and stumbles when Billy shoves him a bit too hard.

There’s a dark look in Billy’s eyes when Steve glances at him, a warning, and Steve takes it with a dry swallow. His eyes dart to his feet, muttering some half-assed something and stepping away toward his locker as they reach the musty room.

It’s always like walking over a minefield; talking to Billy. He never knows what’s going to set him off, take him from kind-of-a-dick to manic-lunatic, but he should know better by now than to bring up November. To bring up Max scaring Billy shitless. To bring up all that crazy from that night.

It’s never a good time. For Billy or for Steve.

He gets changed faster than he ever has, wanting to escape the

weight of Billy's eyes on him, and he's zipping up his stupid jacket when Billy clears his throat. Steve turns, and Billy's back is to him, his movements sharp and jerky, but he talks at Steve without looking at him.

"I'll be there at eight, sharp." Billy says. "I seriously better not find any weird shit."

Steve nods, mouth dry, and he knows Billy can't see it, but he can't bring himself to say anything. He leaves, hands shaking slightly and shoved into his pockets, and he doesn't look back.

After those long nights around Halloween, after the demodogs and the madness that was Will Byers being possessed by a crazy smoke monster and Eleven using her freaky awesome brain powers to close The Gate, it was hard for Steve not to cling close to the kids that were placed under his care on that long, fateful night. He'd put himself in harms way for them, felt like he needed to bodily be between them and whatever creepy crawly might come out of the dark or the fog, and he knows that he'd do it again without hesitation.

He's not sure if it's because he has a death wish or not, considering the shit they always seem to get themselves into.

"No, no, no," Steve shakes his head. "We are *not* walking into a freaking decrepit house where someone was *ritually sacrificed*. It's not happening. No."

Max rolls her eyes skyward as Lucas drops his forehead onto the table. Only Will seems to be enjoying Steve's reluctance, his smile hidden behind his glass of coke as Dustin shoves at Steve's arm.

"Steve, we *have* to investigate!" Dustin insists, gesturing to the shiny new board, far different from their usual DnD game but along the same lines, a gift that Mike had received at Christmas from his parents. "The Order of the Silver Twilight are obviously involved!"

"Yes," Steve holds up a finger, and Mike watches on from behind the large book in his lap, *Shadows of Yag-Sothoth* plastered over it in big,

bold, yellow letters. “ *But* , two of you are already halfway completely insane, we’re down an investigator while Lucas sleeps off whatever that weird snake thingy got him with--”

“The Curse of Yig,” they chorus, like it’s been practiced, and Steve scowls and presses on.

“-- *and* you’re left with two characters who have *very low percentage chances* of survival! No offense, Will.”

“None taken,” Will beams.

“Right,” Dustin bobs his head, looking around the table, hands out like he’s accepting any kind of helpful input from his friends, though none is forthcoming. “Well. We gotta take that chance, Steve!”

“ *Or* ,” Steve counters, looking to Mike, who perks a bit, ready to answer any question he might have. “Or we could call it a night, tuck in, let our party members regain some goddamn health and sanity points before going half-cocked into the creepy murder house. Right?”

“Right,” Mike nods.

“But that’s so *boring* .”

“He’s got a point, Dustin.” Lucas admits.

“You’re all working against me!” Dustin points an accusing finger. “You might as well be working for the Silver Twilight yourselves!”

Lucas groans alongside Max, and Will is practically cackling into his drink now, sharing a look with Mike from across the table full of empty pizza boxes and character sheets. Dustin winds up to keep arguing for pressing onward when the doorbell rings, and Steve pushes to his feet, smiling to himself as he listens to the bickering drift after him down to the foyer.

He opens the door to Billy, standing in the snowy hush of night, hands shoved deep into his pockets with a scowl on his face. Frowning, Steve glances down at his watch and then back up, brows practically hitting his hairline.

“You’re early.”

“Plans didn’t work out so well,” Billy grunts. “Max in there?”

“Oh, my god, Dustin! Don’t be such a dickhead!”

Steve winces as her voice carries out the door, and Billy’s brows lift up and he smiles slow and careful and wicked. “Yeah, I think it’s safe to say she’s in here. You want me to grab her, or...?”

“I can wait,” Billy shrugs. “You mind?”

Steve eyes him for a second, standing there in the threshold, but then he steps aside and lets him in, shutting the door as Billy stamps his boots off on the *Welcome* mat. By the time he’s finished locking up behind him, Billy’s shrugged out of his coat and hung it up on one of the hooks by the door, rubbing warmth into his hands, and Steve frowns at the open front of his shirt like it’s the most offensive thing he’s ever seen.

“Jesus, man, how are you not fucking frozen to death?”

“I run hot,” Billy leers, head canted over to bare the long line of his neck and down the open vee of his button-up, and Steve rolls his eyes and gestures him further into the house with a wave of his hand.

“They’re just wrapping up the current campaign,” Steve says. “It shouldn’t take too long--”

“This is a nice place you got here, Harrington.” Billy cuts him off, eyes skyward, taking in the high ceilings and stairs leading up, up, up to the second floor. “No wonder they called you King.”

“Uh, yeah, I guess.” Steve shuffles a bit, half-choking on a cough as they step into the kitchen and he leads him toward the living room where the kids have set up.

The blinds are drawn over the backdoor that leads out to the heated pool. Steve doesn’t like looking at it when he’s home alone. Tends to leave the blinds shut and all of the lights on. Doesn’t trust the shadows enough not to move.

“That the only reason?” Billy asks.

Steve huffs out a sharp breath that might be a laugh, and Max has caught sight of them and is elbowing Lucas at her side. “Only reason I can think of.”

He stills, stiffening, as Billy steps up close. His voice is low, too low for the kids to hear, his breath hot against the side of his face, and Steve *burns* as he brushes by.

“You know I hate it when you *lie* , Harrington.”

“Billy!” Max pushes to her feet, eyes a bit wide, hair a bit wild. “It’s not eight yet.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Billy waves her off, rocking back on his heels, seeming to revel in the way the entire room has gone stiff and quiet. “I’m not here to ruin the fun. Just got finished a little early. Don’t let me stop you from your weird little nerd shit.”

Max glances quickly between Billy and Steve and Billy again before her expression schools, and she nods firm, just once, before taking her seat again. She fidgets, just a bit, and then focuses back on where Dustin is staring up at Billy and Steve with wide eyes.

She kicks him under the table and he yelps, hissing something under his breath that sounds like a curse, but Steve can’t bring himself to scold him. Lucas has huddled in a bit on himself, but when Max knocks her shoulder against his, he smiles. It’s Mike’s pinched expression that finally coaxes Steve back into motion, though, abandoning Billy halfway between the kitchen and living room and moving back to his spot across from Mike at the table.

“Where were we?” he asks.

Dustin’s throat works. “We were-- We were, uh--”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Billy pads over plopping down onto the lazy boy somewhere in Steve’s periphery, elbows on his knees, brows pinched. “You’re actually *playing* this stupid game with them?”

“Shut it,” Steve snaps, shooting him a firm look that he quickly

softens to something that is almost pleading when Billy's jaw ticks tight. "It's not eight yet, and we're in the middle of a game. So if you would...?"

"Shut it," Billy repeats, a bit tight, but he's leaning back in the chair. "Gotcha."

Steve stares at him for a moment longer, as if to make sure it isn't some kind of fakeout and he needs to watch his back, but then he turns his focus forward and smiles tersely at Mike. "Dungeon Master?"

Billy snorts.

"Dustin was arguing to enter the estate," Mike says. "You were all telling him that it was stupid."

"Right," Steve nods, looking at Dustin. "It's still stupid."

" *Steve !*"

By the time eight rolls around, Lucas has succumbed to the Curse of Yig, Dustin is 97% on his way to insanity, Will nearly died, and Steve has said "I told you so" too many times to count. The boys are helping clean up the pizza boxes and the game, setting it aside for when Max can be there next, and Dustin is telling Mike that they would've been *way* more successful if El had been there while they rinse out their glasses in the sink.

Lucas is hovering, looking uncertain at Max's side, and when he turns his gaze to Steve, Steve lets out a long, *long* breath and nods his head without a word. "Billy. Let me walk you to the door while Max gets her backpack."

Billy drags his tongue along the edges of his teeth, eyeing his sister and Lucas, but after a minute that seems to stretch on to eternity, he nods and shoves to his feet. "Lead the way, Harrington."

Steve bites his tongue all the way to the door, only freeing the words hooked at the back of his throat once Billy has his coat back on.

“You could apologize to him, you know.”

Standing there in the foyer, Billy freezes, his eyes narrowed dangerously on Steve’s face. “Oh? You think he deserves one? You think *you* do?”

“I’m not fucking talking about me,” Steve says, stepping closer, and he knows it’s a mistake by the way Billy sucks in a sharp breath, but he lowers his voice and spread his hands out in front of himself--body screaming *not a threat; do NOT hit* . “I’m talking about the kid you scared the shit out of for no good reason. He’s your sister’s friend.”

“She’s not my sister,” Billy insists, but it’s weak at best, his jaw wound so tight Steve thinks he might crack a molar.

Steve sighs, a bit helpless, spreading his arms a bit more. “He’s just a *kid* , Billy. Would it really hurt your pride that much?”

“You don’t know *shit* about me, Harrington--”

“You’re right, I fucking don’t, and I don’t really care one way or another if I ever do.” Steve hisses. “But I know the difference between right and wrong, and beating on a kid just because he’s *black* is--”

“That’s not fucking *why* --”

“Then apologize!” Steve throws his arms up, feeling a bit manic, heart pounding in his chest, and he knows he’s treading dangerous waters, has been since he let Billy Hargrove into his house, but he’ll always throw himself between danger and those stupid kids. “I don’t-- What’s the big deal? You were wrong; own up to it, and move the fuck on.”

Billy’s mouth twitches into a sneer, and he reaches up and shoves Steve back a step. It isn’t nearly as hard as it *could be* . Steve *knows* how strong Billy is, and considering that his ass isn’t on the ground, he’s feeling kind of lucky.

He watches, silent, as Billy takes one breath, then another, and then he’s shaking out a hand and digging into his coat for his smokes. “I’ll

think about it,” he says, shoving one between his lips and wrenching the door open. “Max! Let’s go !”

“Coming!”

There’s a blur of red as she comes darting by, barely pausing long enough to thank Steve and then bound out the door. Billy lights up his cigarette in the doorway, eyeing Steve one last time.

“Have a good weekend, Harrington.”

And then he’s gone, trailing after his sister into the night, and Steve watches with the door open until they pull out of the driveway, Max waving through the window the whole time. He shuts the door when the taillights disappear around the bend, locking it and resting his forehead against the cool relief of the wood.

He stands there, just breathing, and wonders *what the actual fuck* he was thinking trying to start something like that with the kids just in the other room. He wonders when he became such a bleeding heart, trying to right all the wrongs or what the fuck ever, and wonders if that’s even who he *wants* to be.

“Steve!” Dustin’s voice cracks as he calls for him. “Scary movies our parents won’t let us watch! *Come on !*”

Steve smiles to himself, feeling the heat of his own breath as he laughs against the closed door, and thinks that, whatever he is or wants to be or will be, he’s really fucking happy to have these stupid kids around.

It’s morning when Nancy shows up with Jonathan in tow. The living room is still covered in candy wrappers and blankets, and the kitchen is a mess of flour and syrup, and that’s how they find Steve. Standing in the kitchen, flour in his hair and on his cheek and on his ridiculous, red, cable knit sweater. He smiles and they smile back, Nancy’s eyes soft and maybe a bit adoring.

It might’ve been a fantasy of his, once upon a time, Nancy in his house in the morning, kids goofing and well-fed off in the periphery,

Steve content and tired and so in love. But then he sees her fingers laced with Jonathan's and he has to look away.

"How was date night?" he asks and hates himself.

"Great," Nancy says. "How was the slumber party?"

"Not a whole lot of slumbering," Steve admits. "I let 'em watch *The Thing*."

"Steve," Nancy's eyes widen, but Jonathan is hiding a snort into the crook of his arm; she smacks him for it.

"Hey," Jonathan shrugs. "At least it wasn't *The Evil Dead*."

"You two are the *worst*." Nancy huffs, and her narrowed eyes turn on Steve even as he holds his hands up, dishtowel in hand. "And *you*, Steve Harrington, are an idiot."

His heart lurches in his chest, but he smiles anyways. "Yeah, well. But at least I didn't let them drink any beer."

Jonathan starts laughing in earnest. Nancy swats at him again, and then turns away, calling for her brother.

When Jonathan's finally gotten himself together, Steve can't help but raise his coffee mug up in the mockery of a cheer, grin lopsided. "To being the worst," and his grin stretches into a broad smile when Jonathan starts laughing again.

Steve isn't sure what does it, but he thinks that moment is the start of it. The beginning of the end. Because when he watches Nancy leave, ushering Mike and Will out the door with Jonathan at her side, it doesn't feel like there's a weight crushing down on his chest like it usually does. It doesn't hurt to watch her go. Not with Jonathan.

He turns away as they shut the door behind themselves, whipping the dish towel down onto the counter with a *crack*, startling the two remaining brats sitting at his kitchen table. They look at him, eyes wide, and Steve grins as he meanders over to the stereo system, popping in the first cassette he sees, and bobbing along as *Old Time Rock and Roll* starts pouring from the speakers.

“Alright, shitheads,” he says. “Let’s clean this place up, shall we?”

3. one must put up barriers (to keep oneself intact)

Notes for the Chapter:

Y'all are still blowing me away with the love. Enjoy!

There's a myth perpetuated by small towns that everyone knows everyone and they definitely know all of your business. While for the most part it's true, everyone does kind of know everyone, the only business anyone knows is their own and what they perceive of everybody else's. Linda down at the diner may say she heard about Mr. and Mrs. O'Dell's nasty divorce, she knows that Mr. O'Dell has been sleeping around, and she may mention it to anyone who's looking to get their ear talked off over a morning cup of coffee-- but she doesn't know that Mr. O'Dell has been going into the city and paying for prostitutes to get off because Mrs. O'Dell won't touch his dick after the last miscarriage, or that the divorce is anything but nasty and much more like an amicable split made between two adults who are no longer happy together.

But it's the myth of the small town that makes you believe Linda as she sets down your bacon and refills your mug, and it makes you feel better about your own shitty day, even for just a second.

When Steve Harrington lost his proverbial crown, the entire school knew and the majority of them would claim they knew *why*. If it wasn't because Nancy Wheeler had him *pussy whipped*, it was because he was queer. If it wasn't because he was queer, it was because his dad had gone bankrupt and Steve couldn't buy his claim to high school fame anymore. If it wasn't because his dad had broke the bank, it was because Steve was having an affair with a college student or one of the teachers or was addicted to drugs and couldn't care less about the high school populace at large anymore.

None of it held a candle to the truth. No rumor ever encompassed the *fucking crazy* that actually happened last year, or the nightmares that it brought. Though, they were certainly fun to entertain sometimes, especially the more outlandish ones that have cropped up in the wake of Steve's very public thirdwheeling with his ex-girlfriend and her current boyfriend in tandem with his equally as public

arcade outings with the Shithead Squad when he was on babysitting duty.

And sometimes, honestly, Steve can't help himself.

He slings his arm around Jonathan's shoulder the second he sees him walking down the hall between classes, Thursday before the big game, and he loops his other around Nancy's waist with a little waggle of his brow. He feels Jonathan stiffen against his side, but Nancy is already leaning in with that knowing smile on her face, her hand coming up to rest against his chest.

"Just go with it, Byers." Steve mutters, squeezing a little, and Jonathan lets out a little breath and slumps with a nod.

Nancy is barely holding back her mirth. "What was it this time?" she asks.

"Couple'a sophomores are questioning my masculinity," Steve says with a wink that makes both Jonathan and Nancy blush, and Steve has to bite his own cheek to keep from laughing at the way Jonathan burns up. "Figured I'd give 'em a visual."

"We'll show them," Nancy nods sagely, pressing in closer, and Jonathan sputters.

"I can't believe that."

Steve beams, tossing his head slightly and his hair with it. "I know, and after all of my conquests--"

"No," Jonathan huffs, but he's starting to smile now too. "I don't-- I just don't think this is going to *help* --"

"Well, there's also a rumor going around that we're all into dirty, kinky threesomes."

"*What ?*" Jonathan is sputtering again, pulling away, practically spitting, and Steve ducks away with a laugh as the warning bell chimes overhead.

Nancy has her hand pressed over her mouth, her shoulders trembling

as she pats Jonathan's back, and she looks like she's trying to give Steve a scolding look and is failing miserably at it as he winks again with a click of his tongue and escapes down the hall. "See you at lunch, *babes* !"

He's still laughing when he turns, rounding the corner to head into English and catching a facefull of Billy Hargrove. They collide with a grunt, and Steve isn't quick enough to catch his bag, but Billy is quick enough to catch Steve. They right each other awkwardly, Steve's face a bit warm, and he's already half-breathing out an apology if only to keep from getting into a scrap, when Billy crouches down and plucks up Steve's bag for him.

He holds it out, rather than shoving it against his chest with a threat or an insult, and Steve is so pleasantly surprised that he just reaches out and takes it. Billy's fingers go tight around the worn strap, though, keeping Steve from pulling away, and he leans to glance around Steve's shoulder with his brow arched skyward.

"Guess that's another exaggeration perpetuated by the rumor mill," he says.

Steve scrubs a hand through his hair and waffles his head like he's neither confirming nor denying. "Guess that depends on which one you're talking about."

Billy meets his gaze, pressing Steve's backpack into chest and letting go of the strap. "I think you know which one I'm talking about. You always feed into the buzz like that?"

"Only when it's funny," Steve admits before he can stop himself, and then he's edging around Billy to step into the open classroom door.

He knows it's a mistake because Billy's eyes light up like that time Steve punched him, and Steve realizes it's because he's just thrown him a scrap he's been groveling for since he arrived in Hawkins. *Who is King Steve ? and Why was he dethroned ?*

Steve shudders and makes his way to his usual seat with his gaze down. He's digging through his backpack for his ratty copy of *Jane Eyre* when Billy slides in the desk right beside him. He's not even

bothering to face forward, draping himself sideways in the desk, elbows resting on the edge and the back of the chair as he leans forward, as much into Steve's space as he can get without actually standing right next to him.

"If that's the case, how will I ever know which ones are true?" Billy asks, grin crooked. "I mean, they're all pretty fuckin' funny, if you ask me."

"Oh, yeah, the one where Nancy cut my dick off for cheating on her with a Russian spy is a real riot."

Billy's grin widens. "Well, I thought it was worth a laugh or two. If obviously inaccurate."

"Been staring at my dick a lot, Hargrove?" Steve lifts a brow, but he refuses to look at him, eyes at the front of the room where Ms. Klein is writing some kind of diagram on the chalkboard.

"In your fucking wet dreams, maybe." Billy sneers, and when Steve glances at him out of the corner of his eye, he can see his face has gone from the almost playful taunting shade it usually has these days to something much more severe.

He looks like maybe he's about to say something else, opens his mouth and everything, and then there's the gentle clearing of a throat and both Steve and Billy are blinking up at the girl standing in front of Billy's desk, twirling a curl and popping a piece of pink gum between her glossy lips. Billy lounges back in his seat, smile tight around the eyes.

"Can I help you?" he asks.

"Um... that's my seat." She points at the desk, and that's all it takes for Billy to shift around until he's faced forward, legs spread beneath the desktop, leaning forward on his arms to peer up at her with a dark smile.

"Not today it isn't."

She glances at Steve, like he's supposed to swoop in and help her, but Steve has gone back to studiously minding his own business. Billy's

jaw ticks tight when she's glares down at him.

It's probably one of the most uncomfortable and strangest stand-offs Steve's ever witnessed.

"I think class is about to start," Billy says, all forced edgy charm, voice dipping low the way the girls in Hawkins seemed to go wild for. "There's a seat in the back for you."

With a huff, she turns on her heel, curls bouncing as she files toward the back of the room where Billy usually sits. There's a blush on her cheeks as she goes.

"Now," Billy's focus falls, as it always seems to, back to Steve. "Where were we?"

"*Jesus*," Steve hisses, giving Billy the dirtiest look he can muster; he'd honestly been in such a good mood ten minutes ago. "You're like a dog with a bone."

Billy's nose scrunches up. "So?"

"It's my fucking bone," Steve leans in slightly, his own voice dropping an octave, his teeth gritting as irritation wells up in his chest and bubbles over, watching Billy's eyes dart over his own face. "So just drop it already."

He doesn't know what Billy is looking for in his face, doesn't know what he finds either, but he knows that Billy likes it if the wicked, delighted grin he earns is anything to go by. "Sure thing, your Majesty. Consider it dropped."

Without another word, Billy turns to face forward, right as Ms. Klein has cleared her throat to start class, and Steve has to tear his eyes away from boring holes into the side of Billy's face, hands curled into tight fists over his desktop to keep them from trembling. Or worse, to keep himself from shoving to his feet and starting another fight he knows he won't win.

His knuckles are white, white, *white* and he remembers the sharp ache of them when he'd cracked a solid blow against Billy's cheek. He's sitting there, strung tight like a bow ready to snap and

wondering *why* , when he realizes it's because Billy was just looking at him like he had that night. Right after Steve had punched him, right after Steve had pressed two fingers to his chest and told him to get lost, to *get out* , like whatever *fire* Billy had ranted about had stunned him and angered him and amazed him all at once. Like he'd been in awe of Steve's fury, right up until he'd taken a swing at Steve and everything had deteriorated into a mess of adrenaline and madness.

By the time Steve comes back to earth from wherever he'd drifted off, untethered and lost in the suffocating *dark* of that night, class is over and Billy is sliding out of his seat and smiling at Steve as he goes.

"Catch ya later, princess."

Steve bites back a groan, slumping forward to scrub his hands over his face, and it's only when he stops that he realizes they're still shaking. Shoving to his feet, Steve stuffs his things in his bag, and he's halfway to the door when Ms. Klein calls for him.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" she asks, and he glances at the open door regretfully before giving a tired nod and taking a seat at the desk directly in front of hers.

She doesn't sit. Instead, she rounds the desk and leans back against the edge. She's wearing one of those stupid sweaters again-- this one has poodles on it-- and Steve thinks it might be new.

"You weren't really present in class today again," she says, and Steve nods once more. "Want to talk about it?"

"I'm good," he smiles, but it's a short thing that doesn't reach his eyes.

"Okay," her head bobs a bit and she crosses her arms. "I'll talk then. I don't know what's going on with your personal life, Mr. Harrington, but I'm concerned. Last we spoke, you were planning to apply to college, but I haven't seen a draft of your personal essay since December. Have you changed your mind?"

"No," Steve frowns, drumming his fingers against the wood of the

desktop. “No, I haven’t. I’ve just-- You know, I’ve been busy. Basketball and other classes and stuff.”

“And that’s perfectly understandable,” Ms. Klein says. “But last I checked, this was important to you. Something you were prioritizing. And now you’re putting it off, zoning out in class-- *more* than usual, I might add-- and I get it. English isn’t everyone’s favorite subject, but... Steve, do you *want* to go to college?”

“I-- Yeah, yes, of course I do.” Steve sits up a bit straighter, but he’s not sure if he believes himself even as he says it. “I mean, that’s what I’m supposed to do, right? Either that or go to work for my dad.”

Ms. Klein hums, her lips pursing and her eyes narrowed. “Steve, I didn’t ask if you *should* go to college. I asked if you *want* to. They’re two very different things. And, while I’m fully supportive of whatever decision you make, I have to say that college isn’t for everyone.”

Steve flinches. His eyes flit down to his own hands, and he flexes his fingers as something hot like shame burns in his chest.

“I’m not saying that you’re stupid, Steve Harrington. Don’t for a second think that.” Ms. Klein says, her tone so stern that Steve snaps his eyes back up to her face, and it’s soft with concern. “I’m saying that, if you decided you wanted to pursue something else in life, there’s absolutely *nothing* wrong with that. I’m not here to prepare you for college, I’m here to prepare you for *life* . That’s what teachers are supposed to do.”

Swallowing thick, Steve nods again. A bit slower this time, like he’s processing the implication of her words.

“Can I be honest with you?” she asks suddenly, and Steve blinks a few times.

“Sure.”

“I see a lot of students like you. Students with potential, who think they’re dumb, and they get so wrapped up in who they’re supposed to

be in school and in this little town that they forget to be who they *want* to be.” Ms. Klein sighs, fidgeting with the sleeves of her sweater, and Steve remembers again that crush he’d had and he remembers why as she smiles down at him so kindly. “So I’ll ask again, Mr. Harrington. What do you *want* ?”

“I--” the words die on his tongue, the usual platitudes and excuses and expected responses of *going to college* or *being successful* or *following in my dad’s footsteps* , and he shrugs helplessly up at her. “I don’t know. I just... I know I don’t wanna end up *stuck* in Hawkins, Indiana for the rest of my life.”

“Well,” Ms. Klein breathes in, smile brightening. “That’s a start. So, how about we make a deal?”

“Sure. Okay.”

“Think about what you *do* want,” she says, leaning down almost like it’s a secret. “And then come talk to me. Okay?”

Steve sucks in a breath, because he’s been asking himself that for months-- hell, for over a *year* -- and he still doesn’t know. But he nods and Ms. Klein smiles and he says, “Okay.”

Steve skips basketball practice that afternoon.

He knows that the coach might bench him for the final game of the season because of it, knows he’ll read him the riot act when he shows back up on Friday, but his skin is still crawling from earlier. He’s itching, for a fight or something else he doesn’t know, and he knows that if he sees Billy on the court, it’ll be a bad time for everyone-- mostly his own face.

Nancy finds him leaning against her locker, and she blinks in surprise at the sight, big eyes round with it as she idles up to him and opens the door without a word. She sets her books inside, grabs what she needs, shuts the door again and then faces him, lips pressed up into a little frown.

“You okay?” she asks.

"I don't--" Steve grimaces, shaking his head, and he crosses his arms tight across his chest. "I don't really know. I'm just... I feel like I'm about to vibrate right out of my skin and I'm tired and I-- I just don't know, Nancy."

He looks at her then, pulls his eyes away from where he'd been staring blindly at the long line of lockers across from them and the students walking by, and meets her big, worried eyes with a weak smile. She steps closer, laying a hand on his arm, and he eases into it almost immediately, brows pinching and frown pulling at his face.

"Steve--"

"Nance, why didn't we work out?" he asks, and she jerks back sharply, lashes fluttering. "I mean, we were-- We were good, weren't we? Once we worked out the kinks and shit. We could've been the king and queen of this stupid little town. What-- I mean, what happened?"

Her expression crumbles a bit, and she steps closer, hand on his arm again, but he shrugs away from her touch with a heavy sigh. "Steve--"

"No, it's-- I'm not-- That's not what you *wanted*, right? All the pomp and parties and... me. Right?" Steve searches her face, hunts it over, and he can see the denial in the part of her lips, in the shine in her eyes, and Steve shakes his head again. "Sorry, this is-- I know why we didn't-- I'm just feeling really off, today."

"Do you... wanna talk about it or...?"

"Hey, Nancy, do you have my--" Jonathan stops as he looks up, eyes flitting between Steve and Nancy and Nancy's hand reaching for Steve's arm again, and Steve sighs as Nancy takes a step back. "Hey, um... Steve. What's--?"

"Hey, Jonathan," Steve pushes off the lockers, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his jacket and offering a grimace of a smile. "I was just about to ask Nancy if you two wouldn't mind picking up Dustin for Mrs. H today."

“You were?” Nancy frowns.

“Yeah, actually.” Steve dips his head, smile going a bit more genuine and a bit apologetic. “That was the plan, anyway.”

“Oh,” Nancy blinks, then nods, glancing over at Jonathan. “That would be... fine?”

“Yeah,” Jonathan insists, stepping closer to them both. “Yeah, that’s fine. Any reason why you can’t do it?”

“I just...” Steve thinks about lying for half a second, and then decides not to; his life is kind of full of lies these days. “I really need to get out. Clear my head. Think I might drive down to the quarry, see if I can break any of the ice.”

It’s a pretty common pastime in Hawkins; seeing who’s stupid enough to walk out the furthest on the frozen surface of the local watering hole.

“Do you want anyone to go with you?” Jonathan asks, eyes lingering pointedly on Nancy, and Steve feels a well of warmth fill up his chest as he smiles and shakes his head at the offer.

“Nah, thanks, man. I’ll see you guys tomorrow?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

Nancy catches his wrist before he goes, grip unyielding but not tight. “Call me tonight when you get in?”

Steve nods. “Sure thing, Nance. Later, Jonathan.”

“Later,” Jonathan offers a half-aborted wave, and Steve walks away still itching but grateful-- so *stupidly* grateful-- that Nancy and Jonathan are his friends.

He drives for a while, music blasting, windows down with the cold whipping his face flush. He drives, and drives, and drives and he doesn’t know how, but somehow he ends up pulling up the gravel

drive of the farm where he and four stupid little kids went down into the pits of hell for a family friendly excursion with fire.

For a minute, he sits in the driver's seat and stares out the passenger window, over at where there's still a sectioned off area, yellow caution tape torn and ground frosted over. Then, he kills the engine and climbs out of his car, stuffing himself into his gaudy, stupid jacket and marches himself out to where there used to be a giant hole in the ground.

It's when he reaches the edges, where the tape is whipping in the brisk wind blowing through town, that he realizes his legs are barely holding him up. Stuffing himself deeper into his coat, Steve steps beyond the barrier and half-slips down into the crater that Chief Hopper dug out all those months ago. There's snow piled in it, covering where the hole *down* used to be, and the soil is frozen solid from the long winter still dragging on into February. Steve can see his breath right in front of his face, can see as it comes shorter and quicker, and he plops down onto his ass with a grunt as he huddles in on himself.

Before that night, back when the scariest thing he'd faced was frying a lone demogorgon in the Byers' house with Nancy and Jonathan, he thought that there was nothing he couldn't handle. Not school, not the future, not giant beasts with faces that opened up wide with rows and rows and *rows* of teeth. He'd killed a big one once, what were a few small ones?

But then he was standing under the ground again, staring up at the hole and shoving the kids skyward as the monsters growled and *howled* and Steve had realized he'd never been so scared in his life as he'd been holding Dustin off his feet and *praying* that, if they got Steve, maybe they wouldn't get Dustin. He remembered realizing just how powerless he was. How useless.

Hell, he couldn't even keep a group of four rowdy preteens in line long enough to keep them from dying.

He remembers that and wonders *how the fuck* is he supposed to figure out what he wants in life when he can't even get his head out of those dark tunnels filled with decay. When he can't save himself, let

alone a couple of kids, when he *wants to* with all his breath.

He's not sure how long he sits there like that, but by the time he hears boots crunching in the ice somewhere behind him, he's shivering and his teeth are chattering hard and he can't feel his ass anymore. It's started to snow again, dreamy little flurries down on his head, and they catch in his eyelashes as he looks up at where Chief Hopper is standing at the top of the crater, his hands on his hips.

"Hey, kid."

"Chief," Steve jerks his head in the semblance of a greeting, but he's practically frozen stiff and he looks a bit like a puppet jerking on its strings.

"Got a call about a trespasser," Hopper says. "I'll be real honest, I thought I'd find Mike and his friends down here. Not you."

"Sorry."

"S'okay, kid." Hopper steps down, careful not to slide on the slick ground, and he offers up a big hand. "C'mon. Let's get you warmed up."

Hopper left his AC running, and Steve hisses as he puts his fingers over the gush of warm air, expression twisting up. He thinks about what Will had said, about how the creatures from that freaky Upside Down place hadn't liked the heat, and as feeling begins to tingle back into his fingertips like needle pricks he figures he understands why.

When Hopper slides into the driver's seat of his truck, he shrugs out of his coat and pulls a big thermos from the side compartment in his door. He pours them both a hefty amount of coffee into little tin cups, and it's still steaming when Steve takes one, raising it in thanks before taking a big pull.

"So," Hopper blows on his own cup, trying not to laugh as Steve winces and burns his tongue. "You wanna tell me why you're all the way out here staring into what used to be the pits of hell?"

“Dunno,” Steve says, and Hopper raises a brow. “I mean I don’t know why I’m out here. I was just driving and then I was... here.”

Humming, Hopper nods. “Your parents know where you are?”

Steve snorts, giving him a droll look. “My parents have been out of town since the 17th.”

“That’s fair,” Hopper says. “*Anybody* know you’re out here?”

“Nancy,” Steve says, and then amends a bit reluctantly. “Kind of. I told her and Jonathan I was going for a drive. Not where.”

“You tell ‘em why?”

“Needed to clear my head,” Steve says. “Feels like I’ve been... I dunno. Like I’m lost or something. Like I’ve *been* lost.”

Hopper makes another sound like a hum, jaw working, and he stares out the fogging windshield at the slow snowfall. “And you think you’ll find yourself down in that hole?”

“I don’t know,” Steve says, voice hushed, almost to a whisper. “Maybe.”

They sit in the quiet for a while. Steve blows on his coffee before taking another drink. The hum of the engine is nice; lulling. Finally feeling warm again, Steve is floored by just how *tired* he is.

“You’re a good kid, you know that?” Hopper finally says, and Steve looks over at him with wide eyes. “I mean, for a while there you were kind of an ass. I don’t know if you know this, but I went to school with your father. You reminded me a lot of him.”

Steve cringes, curling in on himself a bit.

“But I gotta say,” Hopper adds, twisting to face him a bit better in his seat. “You’ve turned out better already. Smart, and from what I understand about what’s happened these last couple of times the world’s almost ended, pretty brave too.”

Steve snorts into his cup. “Yeah, real fuckin’ brave, getting my ass

beat and then being dragged on a crazy DnD mission from hell by a bunch of thirteen year old idiots.”

“You know, I’ve talked with all of the kids about that night,” Hopper says. “About how you stopped the Hargrove boy from beating up Lucas. How you took the reigns down there, kept those kids safe in a place where it was anything but. I don’t have a single deputy who would’ve been as composed as you kids have been during all this shit.”

He looks at Hopper again, a bit furtive, gaze darting from the sage look hardening the worn lines on the Chief’s face and then back down to his half-empty cup of coffee.

“You’re a good kid, Harrington.”

Steve shudders, full-bodied and heavy, and he nods slow and a bit unsteady. “Thanks, Hop.”

“Sure thing, kid. Just... maybe try to keep yourself from freezing to death, okay?”

Steve snorts out a laugh, shaking with it, and he nods again. “Yeah, okay. I think I can probably manage that.”

He calls Nancy when he finally gets home. It’s dark out and Steve has all the lights on and he’s curled up on the couch with a bag of chips and a beer, the news droning on in the background on the TV just to kill the silence.

“ *I’m really glad you’re okay, Steve .*” Nancy says after he’s told her about where he went, gave her an abridged version of his conversation with Chief Hopper, and promised her that he was staying in for the rest of the evening. “ *I’m gonna call Jonathan and let him know .*”

Steve smiles to himself, head tipped back against the back of the couch. “What, was he worried?”

“ *We both were, Steve .*”

“Oh,” he blinks, and his eyes burn a little, and he has to bite down on his tongue to keep from fucking sniffing like he’s six. “That’s... Yeah. Let him know.”

“ *I will ,*” Nancy promises. “ *Get some sleep tonight, okay? We’ll see you tomorrow morning?* ”

“Yeah,” Steve swallows, adam’s apple bobbing. “Yeah, tomorrow. Nance?”

“ *Yeah, Steve ?*”

“Thanks again,” he says. “For, you know, everything.”

He can almost hear her smile. “ *Anytime, Steve .*”

Even with the knowledge that Jonathan had been equally as worried as Nancy, it doesn’t prepare Steve for the hug or just how tight it is when he steps out of his car into the school parking lot that morning. He laughs, startled, and pats Jonathan on the back with a bewildered expression directed Nancy’s way that she answers with a hapless shrug.

“Easy, buddy.” Steve says as he pulls away. “I didn’t even get frostbite or break my nose this time.”

“Yeah, no, I know.” Jonathan bobs his head, blushing a bit and awkwardly scrubbing the back of his head. “Just... happy you’re all good.”

“I am,” Steve reassures, tone dipping a bit in earnest as they head in from the cold. “Just had a weird day, is all.”

They walk with Steve between them as they step into the school, shoulders bumping and brushing along the way, and Steve rolls his eyes as they walk by Tommy-- why is it always Tommy?-- and he gags loudly as they pass. Carol is snorting indelicately behind her hand and Billy is nowhere in sight.

Just as Steve’s about to open his mouth, tell them off, Jonathan is

slipping an arm around his waist and pulling him close. Steve jerks, blinking over at him, and Jonathan offers up one of those meek half-smiles.

“Dirty, kinky threesomes, right?”

Nancy’s head falls back when she laughs, but she’s instantly crowding in closer to Steve’s other side, cuddling up under his arm and batting her lashes. “Yeah, Steve, come on. Don’t wanna disappoint our audience, do we?”

Steve shifts slightly, a little off balance, and his nose wrinkles as he goes to shake his head. “You guys don’t have to play into it like I do, it’s stupid--”

“Nah,” Jonathan shrugs, squeezing at his side. “It’s kind of fun.”

“Fun,” Steve repeats, a bit dumb.

“Yeah,” Jonathan says. “Who gives a shit what everybody thinks anyway, right?”

A slow smile spreads over Steve’s face, and he drapes his arm around Jonathan’s shoulder and pulls them both in closer, scrubbing his hand through Jonathan’s hair in delight. “Yeah. Who fucking gives a shit?”

He spots Billy halfway to their lockers, stalled in the hallway and staring blatantly at the three of them, and Steve smiles as he passes and winks.

I want to be brave.

I want to make my friends laugh.

I want to be happy.

Steve’s chicken scratch is barely legible, but when he slaps that down onto Ms. Klein’s desk, he feels a swell of triumph build in his chest when she smiles up at him.

“Alright,” she says. “I think we can work with this.”

4. Sweet to Taste (Saccharine)

Notes for the Chapter:

LOOK AT THIS BEAUTIFUL FUCKING FANART:

https://cdn.discordapp.com/attachments/223381052830384129/380512424132083712/god_i_love_them_mom.png

I cry. <3 <3 <3

Also: warnings for fun panic attacks, not smart underage drinking, and alcohol mixing with undiagnosed PTSD.

Also, also: warnings for Billy fucking Hargrove.

Steve was right when he thought that his coach would ream him a new one and bench him. He sits on the sidelines for almost the entirety of the last game of the season and can't bring himself to give a single fuck about it.

It's only right in the last minutes of the final quarter that he gets put on the court, his teammates worn from a long game of back and forth, neck-and-neck on the scoreboard for the entirety of the last half. Steve's leg is bouncing, resting forward on his elbows as he watches, and he nearly jumps out of his own skin when the coach slaps him on the back.

"Alright, Harrington, get in there. Show 'em how it's done."

He zips out of his uniform windbreaker and jogs out onto the court when the ref waves him on to substitute in for Tommy. There isn't a single snide remark about it in passing, the boy too focused on the game, and he even smacks Steve's shoulder as he goes by for good luck.

Steve gets his hands on the ball with thirty seconds on the clock, and the other team has been suffocating whoever is on point all night, so he's already looking for someone to pass to when number seventeen

checks into him hard and Steve goes sprawling. The shrill sound a whistle rings in his ears, and he groans from the wood, blinking when Billy Hargrove shoves a hand down into his face.

“Christ, Harrington, how many fuckin’ times do I gotta tell you to plant your feet?”

Steve takes it, lets Billy reel him to his feet, and he looks over to see the coach of the opposing team arguing about the foul with the ref. “Probably a few more times before it sinks in.”

He’s awarded two free-throws for his bruises.

“Remember,” Billy hisses as he walks him to the top of the key. “Breathe *out* .”

Steve may be a slow learner sometimes, but that’s a lesson he remembers. He stands at the free-throw line, adrenaline pounding in his head, and he’s sweaty and shaking, but he takes aim and lets his breath *whoosh* out of him as he throws.

The ball barely touches the net as it sinks in; his team goes fucking wild. They’ve just pulled forward by a point.

Steve spreads that gap into two.

Billy ends up with the ball after that and he’s got that wild smile on as he winds the clock down from their side of the court. When the buzzer goes off, Hawkins High School has won their final game of the season, and Steve is swept up off of his feet onto the shoulders of his teammates for getting them there-- even if it was on a foul play.

It’s in the parking lot after the game, as he’s heading for his Beamer, that Tommy calls for him through the still excited crowds.

“Stevie!” He’s beaming, and Steve can’t remember the last time Tommy and him had been on good enough terms for him to call him that. “Party at Dan’s. Be there, fucker!”

“Yeah, okay.” Steve nods, and his hair is still a mess and his jeans and his shirt are sticking to his skin, but he nods. “Sure. See you there.”

That's how Steve finds himself arriving stag to a party already well underway despite the fact that the game only ended an hour ago.

The music is loud, the people louder, and Steve accepts a beer as he walks in the door and tries not to wince too much as they all cheer and raise their drinks when he cracks it open. Duran Duran is belting out of the speakers as Steve makes his way to the edges of the party, sliding away from Sharon Johnson's groping hands with a tight laugh and a heavy pull from his drink. There's a keg already set up on the far end of Dan's patio, the back doors open wide and letting the biting cool of winter take the edge off of the stifling heat inside the house.

Steve spots Tommy holding some poor JV idiot's feet in the air and he stifles a laugh into the open top of his beer can as the kid ends up sputtering, beer pouring painfully out of his nose when they let him back down. Leaning back against the wall, he takes it all in. The dancing, the laughing, the drunken revelry, and remembers a time when he would've been right at the center of it.

He's not sure if he misses it or the safety he'd had in the ignorance of it.

He's on the last dregs of his drink when there's a fresh, cold one shoved against his chest. Steve blinks over at Billy as the guy plucks Steve's empty can out of his hand and tosses it away without a care for where it lands on the living room carpet. Dan's gonna have a hell of a time cleaning this all up later.

"Thanks," Steve shouts over the music.

Billy grins. There's an unlit blunt tucked behind his ear, and Steve is sort of impressed by how quickly he's cleaned up in the short time between the end of the game and the party. He's got one of those stupid shirts on again, that he leaves way too open for winter, a deep green that contrasts with the warm, California gold of his skin, his jeans a dark acid wash and torn at the knee. His hair is perfectly coifed in comparison to Steve's manic finger-combed look, and an earring dangles from one lobe like a lure.

He hooks a thumb into the wide band of his belt where his shirt is tucked in and leans his shoulder against the wall next to Steve's perch. His eyes won't leave Steve's face, and Steve cracks open his new can of beer and takes a drink if only for something to do under such scrutiny.

"You really don't care, do you?" he finally asks, as Modern English's *I Melt With You* switches over to David Bowie's *Let's Dance* .

"About what?" Steve frowns, playing with the tab of his beer can.

"All this shit!" Billy gestures with a big, swinging open hand, and he's still smiling at Steve; an odd quirk of his lips, like he doesn't actually believe what he's saying but is saying it anyway. "You don't give a fuck about any of this, do you? I thought maybe you were just... biding your time for the right moment. Waiting to reclaim your title."

Steve snorts and shakes his head. "No. No, you can have it. It's more trouble than it's worth."

"Level with me, Harrington." Billy leans in, *crowds in* , impossibly closer until Steve can feel the heat of him all along his right side. "What the fuck happened to make you think that?"

Jaw ticking, Steve bites the inside of his cheek and then takes another drink.

"Because I'm having a hell of a time getting a straight answer outta any of these small town idiots!" Billy adds, voice still raised over the sound despite how close he is. "Most I can tell, it was the Wheeler girl. That's what Tommy fucking insists on, anyway. But considering she isn't getting your dick wet anymore, I can't help but wonder what the real answer is."

Steve looks at him then, pulls his eyes away from where one of the cheerleaders is reaming a guy for spilling his drink all over her blouse. He thinks briefly about monsters and little girls being locked away in labs to be experimented on and the men terrifying enough to do that shit.

“The world’s a lot bigger than... *this* ,” Steve says, and Billy’s brows fly up. “A whole lot fucking bigger and a whole lot fucking more fucked up, okay?”

Tears for Fears’ *Everybody Wants to Rule the World* comes on, and Steve laughs.

“You really wanna know what happened, Hargrove?” And Billy wets his lips, shuffles closer an inch, and Steve gives him a rueful grin. “I stood at the gates of hell, stared the devil in the face, and burned the fucker alive. This shit? Small change in comparison.”

He shoves off the wall, then, tipping his head back to drain his beer in one go before tossing it aside. Billy is staring at him, brows pinched and lips slightly parted. Steve shoves his shaking hands into his pockets and smiles.

“Enjoy the party, Hargrove.”

He thinks he’s gonna head for the door, take off before people start puking, but halfway there he looks back to see Billy still staring after him, Sharon Johnson plastered to his side. He veers right of the door, heading for the kitchen instead, and the second he steps inside, a solo cup full of whatever mad stupid concoction they’ve come up with this time is shoved into his hands.

“Victory juice!” they cheer.

Steve doesn’t even hesitate. He takes it and swallows it down in three heavy gulps, to the uproarious jeers of those around him, and the moment it’s empty, they’re filling it up again for him. He nurses that one too, a heavy heat settling into his bones, and the house feels suddenly too full, too crowded, especially considering the burn of booze at the back of his throat and resting in his belly. He tugs at the collar of his black cotton shirt, swallowing another mouthful from his cup, and he wipes the sweat at his temple away with the back of his hand.

He refills his cup on his way out of the kitchen, narrowly avoiding the couple making out on the counter, and steps out into the living room to a mess of lazily grinding hips and clumsily groping hands as

the crowd rocks to Cyndi Lauper's *Time After Time* . He sees Tommy sneaking his hand under Carol's skirt, sees Dan trying to get lucky with the girl with the ruined blouse, and sees Billy dragging his hands down over the pert curve of Sharon Johnson's ass to pull her close.

Steve's stomach rolls and he swallows hard. He turns away and heads for the stairs, taking them two at a time up to Dan's second floor, and he finds the master bedroom empty out of what must be pure luck. He ducks in, closes the door behind him, and rests back against it, the wood muffling the sounds from downstairs.

The room is dark and large, a lot like his parents' own room, and Steve takes one deep breath, then another, before shoving away from the door and meandering over to the window that looks out over the backyard. He's still nursing his drink, his fingertips feeling a little tingly and his face a little numb, but he thinks he deserves it, this, after everything. He thinks he has the right to get a little shitfaced.

With two fingers, he drags the blinds aside and drops his drink when he sees someone diving head first into Dan's pool. He can hear their shrieks through the glass, and suddenly his heart is *pounding* against his ribcage, in his ears, and he can taste something tinny at the back of his mouth. His breath catches, his right knee giving as one of the girls are tossed into the pool, and he buckles down onto the carpet, shoving his fingers into his hair and pulling, and he wishes *desperately* for Nancy or Jonathan or Dustin to be there.

He presses his back to the wall below the windowsill, chest heaving, and the world feels like it might tip sideways any moment now. He squeezes his eyes shut, like that might help, but instead all he sees is poor Barb and that monster and he knows he doesn't know exactly what happened to her but he's pretty sure he can put the puzzle pieces together, even half-drunk and losing his mind to panic in Dan's parents' bedroom.

The door opens, music pouring in, and Steve hears it but he can't move a fucking muscle, too busy trying to remember how to breathe. He hears a girlish giggle, and he presses his face between his knees

with a groan.

The lights flick on overhead, and Billy-- of course it's Billy-- hisses in a breath. "What the fuck, Harrington?"

"Steve?" Sharon perks, but Billy is already ushering her out of the room, practically shoving her, and shutting the door in her face before clicking the lock into place. "*Hey* !"

"Fuckfuckfuck," Steve snarls to the vee of his own thighs, *trembling* , and he startles so hard when a hand lands on his shoulder that he nearly brains himself on the wall behind him.

"Hey, whoa, whoa, hey." Billy holds up his hands, fingers spread as he crouches down in front of him. "Easy, Harrington, you're just having a bad trip."

"I'm not--" Steve hiccups, and *fuck* , he's crying, isn't he? Tears hot and wet and ugly down his face. "I'm not fucking *high* ."

"Yeah, okay, sure. You're not high." Billy nods, and *jesus* , how long has Steve been up here freaking the fuck out in the dark? "Let's just get you up, okay?"

Billy manhandles him to his feet. Steve is heavy and clumsy with drink, heart still beating an uncomfortable staccato in his chest as he sways, and it's only Billy's hands, steady at his back and on his arm, that keep him from falling face first against the tile of the bathroom floor as Billy guides him in. His breath keeps catching, wet in his throat and his chest, but at least he's not crying anymore. Billy's hands are hot and sure on him, easing him over to sit on the edge of the lavish bathtub with much more care than Steve's ever seen.

He thinks he might voice this, tongue heavy and words slurring, because Billy gives him a scathing look that turns quickly amused when, the second he lets Steve go, Steve nearly teeters backward into the tub. He's laughing and shaking his head as he rights him, giving Steve furtive little looks when he pulls away, but he's still *smiling* as he dumps the cup sitting by the sink holding two toothbrushes out and fills it with water.

“Here,” he says, crouching down in front of Steve again and holding it out. “Drink this. Slowly.”

Steve sways and eyes him, and he’s starting to shiver now, his shirt drenched in sweat and cooling as his pulse finally stops trying to rabbit. “But you’re a dick,” Steve says.

“Yeah,” Billy’s smile widens on a breath of a laugh, and Steve isn’t sure if it’s because he’s actually amused by this entire mess of a display or if it’s because Steve is a stupid, sloppy, *funny* drunk-- or, at least, he used to be. “I’m a dick, an asshole, a prick-- I get it. Now drink this.”

Steve wonders when he had the time to call Billy all of those names to his face, and reaches out to take the cup with both hands. He’s not so drunk that he can’t control his own limbs, but he’s still shaking from whatever attack he’d had in the bedroom, so he’s extra careful as he tips his head back.

“*Slow*, Harrington. I don’t want you choking up all over the place.” Billy sneers, and Steve’s never been so tempted to spit on someone. “What’d you even take, anyway? You seem pretty coherent, freak out aside.”

“M’not high,” Steve insists, frowning down at his empty cup. “Drunk? Yes. High? No.”

“Hey, princess, nothing to be ashamed of.” Billy says, and Steve blinks up at him, eyes narrowed and mouth open. “Seen plenty of bad trips. Been on a few myself. You don’t want my pity, whatever, but--”

“*I’m not high*,” Steve says, and there’s a bone weary exhaustion spreading out from his core now that he can breathe, but at least that weird taste of tin is gone and his chest isn’t aching anymore. “*Jesus*.”

“Then what the fuck is wrong with you?” Billy snaps, snatching the cup out of Steve’s hand, and he jerks the sink faucet on to fill it, slapping it off when it starts to run over his fingers. “Fucking freaking out in *Dan the Man’s* parents’ room like some kinda junkie

and crying like a bitch--”

“It’s none of your goddamn *business* , Hargrove.” Steve spits, shoving awkwardly to his feet, and then shoving by and heading for the bedroom door.

“Hey!” Billy shouts after him. “ *Hey !*”

He staggers slightly when he reaches the hallway, the mix of beer and booze rushing to his head. Sharon is nowhere to be seen, and Steve eases himself down the hall with a hand on the wall and then down the stairs with it braced against the bannister.

The party is still going strong, but Steve can hear Billy stomping after him and calling his name. The partygoers don’t exactly part like the red sea for him, but they get the fuck out of his way as he storms through and bursts out the front door into the blissful cold of night with a ragged gasp of relief.

One of the JV kids is puking his guts out into the bushes by the front steps, and Steve feels a pang of sympathy for him. He fumbles around in his pocket for his keys, the breeze already burning his skin to a chilly pink, and he trudges along through the frozen snowfall from last week toward his car, regretting having left his jacket in the passenger seat. Especially with the sweat having cooled on his skin and in his clothes; his teeth are chattering by the time he reaches the driver’s side door.

He’s just gotten it unlocked, is pulling it open, when Billy slaps his palm against the glass and shoves it shut again. “Are you fucking stupid or do you got a damn death wish, Harrington?”

Steve barks out a laugh, and even to him it sounds too sharp and too bitter, but Billy is still there, in his space, keeping his door shut. “What, you gonna beat my face in again for getting a little water on you, Hargrove?”

Billy’s lip curls up into a snarl, and he shoves Steve back against the side of his car. “Fine, you wanna wrap your preppy little car around a tree, be my fucking guest.”

"I'm just *grabbing my jacket* ," Steve says, shouts really, and he's surprised they don't have a crowd considering how loud he realizes they're being.

His chest is heaving again, and he can see his breath and see Billy's breath too. They're both flush, blood burning to the surface against the cold, and Billy takes one jerky step backwards and gestures to the door.

Wrenching the door open, Steve leans across the gearbox and snatches up his coat. He shrugs it on as he pulls back out, stumbling a little on the slick ground, and Billy is watching him with his hands curled into loose fists at his sides. Slamming the door shut with a little too much force, Steve locks it, and then makes a show of jingling his keys and tucking them away before turning on his heel and marching off.

"Harrington," Billy is right on his tail. " *Harrington* ! Where the fuck are you going?"

" *Home* ."

"It's fucking fifty below," Steve snorts at the exaggeration, but it sort of feels that way with how hot he's burning right now. "You're just gonna fuckin' *walk* ?"

"Hawkins isn't that big," Steve says. "I'm not gonna perish in the two miles it takes me to get to my place."

A hand grips Steve's shoulder bruisingly tight, and Billy jerks him around just to shove him back a step. "What the fuck is your *deal* ?"

"Jesus fucking christ," Steve grunts, squaring himself to face Billy under the orange glow of the streetlight overhead. "What is it that you want, Billy? Huh? You want another fight? Take a swing or go *find someone else* ."

Billy's fingers curl tight. Steve can see it, bets his knuckles have gone white with the force of it beneath his stupid fingerless gloves, and he braces for an impact that never comes.

Instead, Billy reaches up, snags Steve by the scruff and *hauls him* over

to where the Camaro is parked a few spots away. “You are making it real fuckin’ difficult not to break that pretty face of yours again, Harrington.”

And Steve is *howling* then, a bit unhinged as he stumbles and struggles in Billy’s grip, laughing as Billy shoves him up against the side of the Camaro. “Like I’ve had to give you a reason before.”

“Quit talking out your ass and get in the fucking car.”

“Why?”

“So I can drive you home where you can be a little pissant *cockblocking* loser *by yourself*.”

“I didn’t *ask* for your help--”

“Get. In. The car.” Billy shoves at his chest again, and Steve jerks, huffing before pouring himself into the passenger seat.

Billy slams the door shut behind him and rounds the front of the Camaro to climb into the driver’s seat. He turns the engine over and peels out so fast that Steve thinks, briefly, he’d have been safer trying to drive himself.

The radio isn’t on full blast the way it usually is, a slow drone of *Paradise City* just under the rumble of the engine, and Steve hunkers down into his jacket and into his seat. Billy isn’t looking at him, his fingers tight over the wheel, and Steve has *no fucking idea* what’s happening. The heater is blowing hot air at his face, though, and soon he’s unzipping out of his coat to keep from sweating his ass off again.

Billy side eyes him at the movement and snorts. “That’s the stupidest fucking jacket I’ve ever seen.”

“I didn’t fucking ask you for your opinion, did I?”

“You’re fucked up, Harrington, you know that?” Billy’s voice raises, and Steve would hit him if he wasn’t the one driving. “You show up and sideline yourself like you’re *above* all of us, spouting fuckin’ nonsense about *devils* and shit, and then have some kind of episode

upstairs like a goddamn *freak* --”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Steve says, almost sullen.

“--you say it’s not a fucking trip, but your pupils are blown to shit and you’re freaking out all over the place.” Billy rolls right over him, and he takes a corner a little too quick for comfort, casting a glare over at the passenger seat. “I *swear* , if this is about the Wheeler chick, you’re a bigger fucking pussy than I gave you credit for--”

“Nancy has nothing to do with it!” Steve glares right back. “And I’m fucked up? *I’m* fucked up? What about *you* ? You’re half-unhinged on a good day, always trying to pick a fight, and for *what* ? Because you wanna be *top dog* ? I don’t *give a shit* , Hargrove.”

“ *Why* not?”

“ *It doesn’t fucking matter !*” Steve snarls, and he hasn’t been this angry, this *frustrated* , since he saw Nancy sitting with Jonathan on her bed that night before everything went to hell and back; he’s burning up inside, itching to hit something, *to hit Billy* , and his entire body is *quivering* with it.

“ *Whoo !*” Billy whoops suddenly, eyes bright on Steve as he tears down the suburban streets that lead to Steve’s house, that crazy fucking smile on his face. “ *There* he fucking is. King Steve, just *burning* beneath the surface!”

Steve slumps back like the breath has been kicked out of him, eyes wide. “What the *fuck* are you talking about?”

“You gotta lot of rage hiding underneath that pretty boy exterior, Harrington. A lotta fire.”

“You’re crazy,” Steve mumbles, eyes still wide on the side of Billy’s grinning face. “You’re fucking insane.”

Billy actually fucking *winks* at him, pulling into Steve’s driveway and shifting into park before twisting to face him. “Yeah, well, it takes one to know one.”

"I am--" Steve's voice breaks on a laugh. "I am *nothing* like you."

"You sure about that, princess?"

And Steve doesn't know. He doesn't *fucking know*, not when he's still burning and itching and prickling under his skin, not when he wants to punch that smug look off of Billy's face, and certainly not when he's barely hanging on, half-drunk, exhaustion clinging at the edges of his head from whatever his weird little episode was and the goddamn screaming match he seems to have just finished.

Billy grins, knowing and sure, and Steve wants to lurch across the gear shift and--

"Now," Billy wets his lips, pointing behind Steve's shoulder to his house. "Get the fuck out of my car, Harrington."

"Fuck you," Steve breathes, and Billy's eyes light up like Christmas has come again, but then Steve is *scrambling* to get out, to escape, and his head is swimming but his feet are sure as he steps out and slams the door shut on whatever Billy Hargrove was about to say.

The engine of the Camaro revs behind him, taunting, as Steve stomps up to his front door, and Steve's just drunk enough, just petty enough, to flip him off as he steps inside. Window down, Billy cackles and then peels off, music blasting into the night.

Steve doesn't know what to expect when he walks into school on Monday, but rumors that he stole Sharon Johnson right out from under Billy Hargrove's nose and then got his ass beat are nowhere on the list. They're silenced anyways, the second he walks in without a shiner, but he doesn't escape Nancy's fluttering, worried hands despite being perfectly fine.

"Did he hurt you?" she asks, eyes big and voice tight. "I heard Carol talking about it when we walked in-- are you okay?"

"Nancy-- Nance! I'm fine." Steve says, catching her wrist, and she smiles one of those tight lipped smiles up at him. "It isn't true. He didn't lay a hand on me-- Well, he didn't beat my ass."

“But he hurt you?”

“ *No* ,” Steve sighs, and she trails after him toward his locker. “He drove me home. I was drunk, and I-- I freaked out.”

Nancy frowns. “Freaked out?”

“I don’t know how to explain it, I just--” Steve glances around and then lowers his voice, pulling her in by the waist to rest back against the line of lockers next to his. “I was drinking and then they all started *jumping into the pool* , and I just--”

“Oh,” she exhales, eyes going a bit glassy. “Oh, *Steve* --”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“What’s not a big deal?”

Steve jerks, a full-bodied and ridiculous thing, and practically slams his locker shut as Billy leans against the one next to it with a half-cocked smile.

“Morning, Harrington.” Billy says. “Wheeler.”

“Billy,” Nancy says, eyes darting between him and Steve. “Um.”

“How was the rest of your weekend?” Billy asks with a tilt of his head, thumbs tucked into the loops of his jeans. “Anything exciting happen?”

“ *No* . Jesus.”

Nancy bites her lip. “Steve--”

“C’mon, *Steve* .” Billy grins with all his teeth, tongue sliding between the edges. “That anyway to talk to the buddy that drove your drunk ass home?”

“We’re not--” Steve laughs, shaking his head. “One drunken good deed does not a blossoming friendship make, *Billy* .”

“Aw, c’mon, pretty boy. No need to get your panties in a twist--”

“Fuck off --”

“You gave me a taste’a the old you, Harrington. And it was *sweet* .” Billy says, tone dropping, and Steve bites the inside of his cheek to keep from shuddering. “You can’t blame me for wanting a little more.”

“Um,” Nancy squeaks, her face burning as she looks between them.

“All that fire in you,” Billy inhales, gesturing lazily at Steve’s dumb cable knit sweater and ratty jeans. “ *Hiding* . I’m gonna figure out what makes you tick, Harrington. What makes you *burn* .”

Steve’s mouth goes incredibly dry.

“See you in class, *Steve* .” Billy says, grin lopsided, and then he saunters off, leaving Steve and Nancy gaping behind him.

“Uhm, Steve.” Nancy clears her throat. “What *happened* ?”

Steve drops his head against the cool metal of his locker door and *groans* .

5. Is is so wrong (to be human after all?)

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for this being so late! I hurt my back and haven't been sleeping well, so it took a little longer.

“Is this, like, gonna be a regular *thing* ?” Jenny asks, arms crossed as she glares down her nose at where Billy, for the fourth day in a row, has taken her seat next to Steve in English.

“I see the board better from here,” Billy grins up at her, cheek dimpling. “Sorry, sweetheart.”

With a roll of her eyes, she flounces off, ponytail bouncing. “What *ever* .”

Steve would laugh if he didn't want to slam his head down onto his desk so much. “You're a real asshole, you know that?” he says instead.

Billy's grin is as lopsided and pleased as it ever is, whenever he can manage to reel Steve in enough for conversation. Usually, Steve is adamantly tight-lipped, refusing anything more than pleasantries even as Billy needles at him off and on throughout the period.

Today, Steve's just a bit too raw already. The calendar changed over to February on Wednesday and it was still colder than sin out, had actually dropped ten degrees on average since Monday, and he received a call from his mother the night previous, picking it up to a litany of apologies and excuses and *your father has a business deal in New York, lovey, we'll be home soon, I promise* . Then, the cherry on top of it all, Steve was pretty sure he was getting a cold, woke up late this morning, and spilled coffee on his favorite pair of jeans.

“I think you've mentioned something like that before,” Billy says.

Steve snorts, not bothering to look at him, tapping the eraser end of his pencil against his half-written notes from class the day before. “It bears repetition.”

With a low whistle, Billy lounges back in his seat, arms crossing and eyes burning on the side of Steve's face. "Someone's in a mood today. What's wrong, Harrington? Wake up on the wrong side of the bed?"

"You really don't have an *off* button, do you?" Steve scowls down at his notebook, tapping a little faster. "You'd think ignoring you all week would be message enough, but I guess I'm probably gonna have to spell it out for you, aren't I?"

"Shit, princess." Billy's voice drops, and Steve can hear him leaning closer with a rustle of his ridiculous acid wash jacket that must do *nothing* to fight off the cold outside, and can see it out of his periphery as Billy cants his head over to squint at him. "You really are on edge this morning, aren't you?"

Sucking in a sharp breath, Steve looks at him, hands stilling and features flat. "Eat me, Hargrove. You can shove your pseudo-concern right up your ass where your head usually is."

Billy snorts, and there's laughter in the lines around his eyes, but he doesn't look away. "What was it, huh? Catch the Wheeler girl necking with Byers in his car?"

Jaw flexing, Steve turns his gaze forward, knee bouncing beneath his desk and blood burning a bit-- he's annoyed and he's tired and he--

"Or did you have another freak out over nothing--?"

Steve's pencil snaps in his hand. The sound jolts him. He hadn't realized he'd been pressing it so hard against the desk.

He stares, wide eyed, at the jagged broken ends. He knows Billy is staring too.

"Jesus, Harrington. I was just yanking you--"

"Shut up," Steve sinks down into his chair, face hot, and he dusts the broken pieces of his pencil off of his desk with a clumsy hand.

"You're *shaking* --"

“And you’re *what* ?” Steve bares his teeth at him, hating how delightedly *giddy* Billy looks, staring at him with wide, wild, bright eyes. “The benevolent asshole, now? Just leave me the fuck alone.”

Billy’s teeth click audibly with how hard he snaps his mouth shut. His nostrils flare, and his fingers flex where his hands are hanging between his knees, elbows on his thighs, and for a moment Steve thinks he should’ve just kept on ignoring him.

But then Billy is leaning up, leaning back, shuffling around in his desk to face forward, and Steve lets out the breath he was holding in a wavering hush. Billy doesn’t say anything else, and neither does Steve, and then class is starting.

There isn’t a word shared between them for the rest of the period.

Jonathan sets down a cup of coffee in front of him at lunch, and Steve is so happy he nearly *weeps with it* .

“I could kiss you,” Steve mumbles into the cup, clutching it close. “Like, right on the mouth, I don’t even give a fuck.”

Cheeks pink, Jonathan settles next to Nancy and drapes his arm around her shoulders as she smiles at him. “You looked like you needed it.”

He’s right. Steve hasn’t been sleeping well. He usually doesn’t, but these last few nights have been worse than usual.

Something has been eating at him since the party, since his moderate to severe freak out in Dan’s house, and any time he lays down in his own bed to close his eyes, he ends up lurching back out of it ten minutes later, flipping all the lights on in the house and huddling up on the couch with late night television droning on until he literally can’t keep his eyes open anymore. His stomach is in knots, and it’s worse anytime he looks at Nancy because he can tell his confession has taken its toll on her too.

Barb was her friend, after all. Steve doesn’t think he has a right to be twisting himself up so much about it, but he can’t help but wish he’d

gotten his own head out of his ass sooner rather than later, when coming face to face with gangly monsters made up of the stuff of nightmares. He is, though, and he keeps losing sleep to all of the *could have beens* and *might haves* that always come with thinking about other dimensions and Mind Flayers.

He doesn't know where Jonathan scored the coffee, but he's not going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"You need to relax, man." Jonathan says, and Nancy is already nodding her head along with him.

"Or talk to someone," she adds, a touch softer.

"That's stupid. I'm *fine* ." Steve thinks he sounds like a skipping record. How many times has he said he's fine this week? "I mean, it's not that big a deal. You guys don't-- I mean, you guys are coping, or whatever, so... I should be just fine."

Nancy and Jonathan share a look, and then Nancy is leaning across the library table, resting her hand over one of Steve's.

"Steve, we aren't--" she sighs, her shoulders drooping. "We aren't dealing with this alone. *You* don't have to deal with this alone."

Steve squints over at her, fingers twitching beneath hers. "What do you mean?"

"I've been talking to the school counselor since last year, after they officially declared Barb missing." Nancy shrugs. "And Jonathan..."

"I've got my mom and Will," he says. "And Hopper, sometimes, too."

Nancy's fingers tighten over Steve's when he tries to withdraw. "And we've got *each other* , Steve. I know it's been-- It's not *easy* , but--"

"We're here. If you need us." Jonathan says, and he looks so serious, so earnest, that Steve is tempted to kiss him all over again in gratitude. "If you want us to be."

"I--" Steve's throat works, and he looks down at the cup of coffee in front of himself. "I don't, uh..."

He doesn't know how to put the words to it, is almost ashamed by it. His fear and his guilt and the way he sometimes can't get out of his own head anymore these days.

He's caught up in the past when all he wants to do is look forward. Figure out who he is after all of this, or who he wants to be in the future when it inevitably all goes to hell in a handbasket again. And he's been close a few times; he's pieced together a few things thanks to Ms. Klein and Hopper and his friends. He just doesn't know how to keep moving forward like that when it seems he always ends up knocked back three steps right after he's taken one.

Curling away from Nancy's touch, Steve worries the inside of his cheek between his teeth, and he's already nodding before he even speaks.

"My parents are always out of town. Used to, I loved it. Made me feel like I was already free of them. But now..." Steve rubs a hand over his face, then up into his hair, and it doesn't look nearly as coifed as usual, so he's only making a further mess of it. "I hate being in that house alone. It sucks. And it always feels like something is going to happen when I'm not looking, and I'm going to miss it, and someone-- you guys, or the kids, or *someone* -- is gonna get hurt while I'm not paying attention."

Nancy makes a soft sound at the back of her throat, and her hand is still between them like an offering, but Steve isn't quite ready to take it.

Under the table, Jonathan nudges at his sneaker with a booted toe. Steve looks up, blinks a few times, and offers a tired, tight lipped smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

"Come over to my place," Jonathan says.

Steve blinks. "What?"

"Your parents aren't home, right?" Jonathan shifts beside Nancy, and she's looking at him with a furrow between her brows. "So, come over to my place. We'll-- I dunno, we'll kick back and listen to music or something. My mom'll make dinner when she gets home, she'll be

happy to have you, and-- I dunno. At least then you won't be alone, right?"

Steve blinks again, for an all new different reason, and he clears his throat past the tightness that constricts it. "I don't want to impose--"

"It's not a big deal," Jonathan says. "It'd be cool to-- to hang out, or whatever. Outside of classes and monster hunting."

A laugh escapes him, and Steve nods, relaxing back into his seat and feeling a month's worth of tension drain right out of him just at the thought. "Yeah. Yeah, okay, sure. But I'm buying dinner and bringing it over. I don't-- If I'm gonna be invading your house unannounced, I'm not gonna be a hassle for your mom."

"I doubt you could be any more of a hassle than when Will brings the guys over."

Steve snorts, bobbing his head again, and he glances at Nancy to find her beaming. "True. I guess that's true. So... tonight, okay?"

"Tonight's great."

"You've got a great collection," Steve says, well after dinner, after listening to Ms. Byers-- *call me Joyce, sweetie* -- talk about the strange requests she'd had from old man McGuire that sounded like maybe it was a common if not daily occurrence, after laughing at Will's day and about how Dustin had been far too enthusiastic with Mr. Clark today during the frog dissection, and he's in Jonathan's room now, with a sleeping bag rolled out on the floor on top of the half a dozen blankets that Ms. Byers had piled in on the carpet for cushion-- *it gets cold at night, do you need a space heater?*-- and the dozens of records that Jonathan has collected over the years out on display. "The Cure, The Smiths, Led Zeppelin-- I mean, this puts... anything I have to shame."

"I sincerely doubt that," Jonathan huffs out a laugh, tossing one of his pillows to the ground for Steve.

"No, no, I'm serious." Steve glances back at him, pulling one of the

record sleeves free and flipping it over in his hands. "I've got more cassettes than I do vinyl, but... I dunno. The sound's always richer or something when you listen to it like this."

Jonathan nods, bouncing slightly when he sits on the edge of his bed. "I've been collecting for a while. Mostly used stuff-- they take up more space, so a lot of people get rid of them these days."

"That should be a crime."

"I certainly think so," Jonathan says, looking a bit awkward, sitting there and chewing on the inside of his cheek as Steve peruses his room.

The walls are littered with all kinds of posters. Steve's particularly fond of *The Evil Dead* one, and he gestures to it with a little waggle of his brow and earns a snort of laughter for it. On the desk in the corner, there's a cluster of film canisters and two cameras. Steve doesn't touch them, doesn't feel like he has a right to, but he fans out a few of the photos printed out on display.

The images are striking. There's a contrast of open space in each of them, the light striking angles honestly and openly, and even though they are all in black and white, Steve feels a warmth from each of them.

They're earnest. Honest. Hopeful.

"You're really good at this," Steve mutters, skimming over a few more. "Did you always know you wanted to... you know?"

"Want to take pictures that get me into way too much trouble?"

Steve whips around, eyes wide, but Jonathan is smiling over at him kindly.

"Yeah. Pretty much." Jonathan shrugs, and it looks like he's trying not to laugh. "Though, maybe not the trouble part."

Palming the back of his head, Steve sighs. "I ever apologize for that?"

“Yeah, Steve, you did. It’s fine. I would’ve-- I mean, I got where you were coming from.” Jonathan ducks his head, face burning a bit. “About a lot of things, actually.”

“What do you mean?”

“After seeing Nancy and me together. I get why you-- I mean, I don’t think I would’ve done the same thing, but you were, you know, hurt. And it wasn’t okay, what you did, but I-- I mean, I get it.” Jonathan looks up at him again, and Steve can’t help the little grin that spreads over his face. “I would’ve been mad and hurt too.”

It’s an odd moment, considering Jonathan had beat Steve’s ass for being an ass that day, but something clicks into place then. They’ve both loved and lost the same girl, in one way or another. Steve nods, swallowing thick, and he pads over to plop onto the bed at Jonathan’s side.

“For what it’s worth,” Steve says. “I’m glad it’s you. That she’s with. Anybody else, I’d hate their guts. But... if it’s anyone else, it’s you.”

“Same,” Jonathan replies instantly, quickly, and then adds just as fast, “I mean, if she wasn’t with me, I’d be... I’d be okay if she was with, well, you.”

Steve sucks in a short breath, nodding again, and he smiles ruefully to himself, gaze tipping to the popcorn ceiling overhead. “You know, I’m kind of jealous of you guys. Not of-- Well, okay, maybe a little bit of the whole relationship thing, but... you’ve always known what you wanted to do. Nancy, too.”

“She’s always got a plan,” Jonathan bobs his head.

“Yeah,” Steve laughs. “And I... I mean, I have no fucking clue, man. No clue. Like, *at all* .”

“You’ll figure it out,” Jonathan says. “You’ve got plenty of time. You don’t have to know what you want to do with the rest of your life right now.”

Steve snorts. “I feel like I’m supposed to.”

“Well...” Jonathan’s expression pinches up, nose scrunching. “That’s stupid. And not true. You don’t have to have all the answers for life and-- and-- *stuff* today, tomorrow, or even *next year* . You don’t have to decide now.”

For a long moment, Steve just looks at him.

It doesn’t exactly get rid of the pressure, constant and overwhelming and terrifying, that he’s supposed to work out what he wants already, that he should have figured everything out by now, but it helps. It’s soothing.

“Thanks,” he says.

“Sure, man.”

“I guess we should get to bed, huh?”

Jonathan nods. “Probably.”

They both crawl into their respective beds, Steve telling Jonathan about how absolutely *despondent* Dustin had been when he found out he was staying over at *Will’s place* and that he didn’t get to. Jonathan laughs, even once the lights are out, and Steve settles into his odd little nest on the floor with a contented hum.

It’s nice not to be alone, even just for now.

He wakes in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. Jonathan is snoring slightly, and it does wonders to calm his racing heart, but not much to help him get back to sleep.

He’s as quiet as he can be, climbing out from the sleeping bag and shivering in the cool air of the drafty house, easing Jonathan’s bedroom door open and heading for the kitchen. He finds Joyce Byers sitting at the table, smoking a Camel, and falters in the archway between the kitchen and the living room.

She’s already spotted him, however, and she waves him over with a smile.

“Couldn’t sleep?” she asks, voice a hushed whisper.

Steve hesitates, but nods, sliding into the chair opposite her. “Nightmares.”

Ms. Byers hums, bundled up in a ratty old sweater, dark circles under her eyes. “Will has a lot of those. I do too, sometimes. There’s always someone up and walking around this house at night.”

“I can imagine,” Steve says, but he really can’t.

Can’t imagine what that kid went through. Feels bad that he barely touched the terror of the Upside Down and is still shaken by it, when tiny little Will Byers has been through so much worse.

Ms. Byers eyes him and then offers him the unlit end of her cigarette. Steve blinks at it, then takes it with a little smile, dragging on it long and smooth before hissing out smoke. The reaction is near instant, nicotine smoothing out some of the rougher edges of his frayed head, calming him enough to slump back in his chair. He takes another drag before passing it back.

“I’m supposed to be quitting,” Ms. Byers says.

“I’m supposed to have never started.”

She hides a smile and rocks a bit, smiling down as she taps the end against the ashtray. “I’m glad Jonathan convinced you to come over tonight. He told me about your parents.”

Lips pressing thin, Steve watches her breathe out smoke.

“I just want you to know, if you ever need somewhere to go, you’re welcome here. My boys love you.”

Steve blinks a few times, sitting up a bit in his chair. “You really don’t--”

“For a long time, the only friend Jonathan had was Will.” She taps the end of the cigarette against the ashtray again, passing it back. “He’s a shy boy-- both of them are. Quiet. And I know for a while, things were... contentious between you two. But I’ve heard how

good you are with the kids, and Jonathan is always talking about you and Nancy, and... you're always welcome here, Steve. No matter what."

Something curls tight in Steve's chest and his throat. He can't even bring himself to take a drag.

His eyes are a bit misty when he nods, fingers trembling as he brings the cigarette to his lips, pulling in fire and breathing out smoke. "Thanks, Ms. Byers. I really appreciate that."

"Really, Steve." Ms. Byers gives him a look. "Call me Joyce."

Friday is a bitter relief. There's a low pressure system coming in, Steve can feel it weighing down in the air, in the static charge everything seems to have. He hopes it waits until the weekend to hit; he'd rather not have to do any driving in a blizzard if he doesn't have to.

He's ditched the ridiculous down jacket for one of his dad's old wool lined peacoats, jamming his hands into the pockets as he walks into school that morning, eyes watering from the cold striking his face, hair a mess, nose frozen. He greets a few people in the halls, all just as miserable from the cold as Steve feels, nodding when Dan waves from his locker instead of ignoring them like he usually might.

He doesn't see Jonathan or Nancy, though he'd mercilessly mocked Jonathan and Will's disgusted looks that morning while eating peanut butter and banana toast at the Byers' kitchen table, and he imagines it's because Nancy is undoubtedly interrogating Jonathan about the night. He wonders if Jonathan will cop to offering Steve a blunt-- *it helps, with the freak outs, if you want* -- or the small baggy of weed he'd ended up handing over-- *Byers, you dog, you've been holding out on me* -- when Steve had said he doesn't get high on school nights anymore.

He doubts it, but imagining Nancy's face leaves Steve in a good mood all the way through to English, where he takes his seat next to Billy still smiling. Billy is watching him, brow up, and Steve pulls his

books out and leans back in his seat with a contented hum.

“S’going on, Harrington?” Billy asks, grin tight and plastered to his face. “Someone finally get laid?”

“Oh, yeah, something like that.” Steve smiles over at him, innocent as can be, Billy’s usual ruffling breezing by Steve’s unusual cheer. “Spent the night at the Byers’. Had myself a real good time.”

Billy’s nose wrinkles up, eyes narrowed.

“I mean, way better than last time, anyway.” Steve leans in, like he’s confiding some big secret, and grins as Billy leans away. “See, last time, some douchebag nearly broke my nose and nearly got his dick nailed to the living room floor for it. Least, that’s what I’ve been told.”

“You’re feeling awful fuckin’ bold today, aren’t you? Or are you looking for a beating?” Billy sneers, and Steve lounges back in his seat, head tipped back, with a little shrug.

“Maybe I’m just in a good mood.”

“Yeah? Well, it’s fuckin’ annoying.”

“Aw, c’mon, *Billy* .” Steve drums his fingers against his desktop. “What happened to being such good friends?”

“You gonna tell me about your freaky episode?” Billy asks.

“Sorry, Billy boy.” Steve shakes his head. “That’s a level five friend secret, *at least* . To unlock my mysterious backstory, you’ve got to be a decent human being first.”

Billy snorts. “Charming, pretty boy. No wonder you’re so popular.”

“Are you implying I’m not king of the school anymore?” Steve gasps, hand pressing to his chest, and he’s surprised when Billy’s head lulls back with a laugh. “Damn. I’m heartbroken, really am. Despondent.”

“Yeah, yeah, you don’t give a shit, right?” Billy eyes him, resting

forward on an elbow.

“Ding, ding, ding.” Steve drolls. “I think we have a winner.”

“And I think you’re full of shit, Harrington.”

“Guess it’s good that I don’t give a fuck what you think, then, isn’t it?” Steve asks, and Billy blinks at the dark, earnest look on Steve’s face, at the cocky little smile.

“You really don’t, do you?” Billy hums, fingers twitching; Steve thinks he wants to go for the pack of cigarettes jutting out of the pocket in his jean jacket. “You care more about that merry band of losers more than anybody else at this school.”

Steve’s about to reply, tell him *yes, absolutely, we saved the world together*, but Ms. Klein is up at the front clearing her throat.

He turns forward, pulling his notebook open, and a pen free from the spiral binding. She’s got some notes jotted up on the board, and Steve starts copying them down as Billy leans over.

“It’s a good look on you,” Billy murmurs, under the rustle of paper and pencils and pens. “Not giving a fuck. You should wear it more often.”

It catches Steve off guard, makes the tips of his ears burn, and he glances at Billy to find his attentions already elsewhere. He swallows, eyes flitting over his profile, and then drags his gaze back forward, to the board, and lets himself get lost to the general tedium of class.

The beginnings of a weekend long storm hit somewhere between fifth and sixth period. By the time school is out, the wind has picked up and the temperature has dropped to well below thirty.

Steve is already shivering as he stomps through the fresh snowfall out toward his car. He keeps his head down, face pressed into the wool collar to keep his cheeks from freezing too bad, and he stumbles to a stop when he reaches his driver’s side door to find Billy Hargrove

leaning back against it, smoking a lit cigarette between gloveless fingers, and shivering.

“Are you crazy?” Steve asks, and Billy barely slides over enough to let Steve unlock his door. “Decided to upgrade from general nuisance to stalker, now?”

“My car won’t start,” Billy says around the unlit end. “Transmission’s frozen or some shit.”

Steve sighs, head hanging. “It’s probably your battery,” he says and gestures with a swing of his head. “Get in.”

He slides into the driver’s seat as Billy stomps around to the passenger side, climbing in and dusting himself off with a shudder. He stamps out his cigarette in the ashtray, cupping his hands together and blowing into them, his face and hands and neck all red.

Steve wonders how long he was standing out there.

“Happens sometimes,” Steve says instead of sitting in silence, as he turns over the engine and cranks the AC up to its hottest setting. “Specially with older models. Gets too cold, too fast, and the oil freezes or the battery gets too cold to hold a charge.”

“Just another shit thing about this shitty town,” Billy grunts, moving to light up a new cigarette. “You mind dropping me off at mine after leaving the brats at the Wheeler’s? I gotta call a tow truck; no way I’m leaving her here overnight.”

“You’re not smoking in my car,” Steve says. “You got jumper cables?”

Billy sighs, tucking the cigarette behind his ear as Steve starts rolling down the road. “Back at my place.”

“If it’s not the oil, I can get you started.” Steve says. “We’ll get the kids first.”

“Fine.”

Steve doesn't crank the window down when he pulls up, kicking the door open long enough to shout over at where Dustin, Lucas, and Max are all huddled under the awning at the middle school's entrance. Mike and Will must've already been plucked up by Jonathan and Nancy, and Steve is glad he won't have five idiots trying to pile into his backseat today.

"Hey, shitheads! Get in!"

Dustin has never looked more betrayed than when he slides into the backseat, glaring at where Billy has his boot propped against the dash. Behind Steve, Lucas squirms a bit, despite the hand Max rests on his wrist.

Billy doesn't look their way.

"You're coming tonight, right?" Dustin asks.

"Wasn't exactly planning on it," Steve glances at him through the rearview. "Isn't Mrs. Wheeler gonna be there?"

Next to him, Billy grins with all his teeth. "Even more of a reason to go, Harrington. You seen that woman?"

Steve's face scrunches up, nearly matching Max's in the back seat. "*Gross*, Billy," she says, and he's cackling as he flicks his lighter open and shut.

"Yeah, no," Steve says, eyes meeting Dustin's again through the mirror. "I've got plans."

"Plans, huh, Harrington?" Billy looks at him, and Steve resolutely stares forward at the snowy roads. "Like what? Spending your night alone with your right hand?"

"My left, actually." Steve says, and Billy seems to choke for a second.

"But *Steve*," Dustin is leaning forward, and Steve instantly knows he's not buckled in, and he very nearly slams on the breaks. "We've

gotta explore the cursed canyons and we can't do it without you."

"You'll be *fine* ," Steve huffs. "Sit back and buckle up before I hit a patch of ice and you break your fucking neck, dickhead."

"Lucas, help me out, here!"

When Steve looks back, Lucas is too busy eyeing Billy where he's lounged in the passenger seat. Steve clears his throat, reaching over and *whapping* Billy across the chest with the back of his hand.

Billy jumps, jerking in his seat, glaring with wild eyes as Steve lifts a brow and then darts a glance pointedly backwards. Looking over at where Lucas is hunched in on himself, Billy snorts and twists back around, crossing his arms over his chest while Dustin is going on about *the importance of the Party* .

Cheeks blowing out, Steve shakes his head, pulling up the cul-de-sac where the Wheeler house sits. He slides into park and unlocks the doors, unbuckling and twisting around to face the three of them, and Dustin looks ready to read him the riot act when Steve holds up a finger.

"Here's the deal, screwballs." Steve says. "I gotta help Max's dickhead brother out, and when I'm done, I'll come over until seven *at the latest* ."

Dustin's face lights up. "Make it eight, and you've got a deal--"

"Ah, ah, ah! No fucking negotiating," Steve scowls. "I told you, I've got plans."

"Lady plans?" Dustin does one of those stupid purrs, and Steve wants to smack him.

"No. And it's none of your business. Now get out so I can get finished faster and keep you from making stupid decisions that lose us all more sanity points."

"Fine. Deal. I'll save you the good seat on the couch."

"Thanks, kid. Now get the fuck out."

They all scramble, Lucas the first to break out and practically booking it to the Wheeler's front door. Mike is there to open it and welcome him inside, and Dustin pauses on the steps to wave back at Steve.

With a roll of his eyes, Steve pulls back into drive and flips a lazy u-turn, but he's smiling to himself. He ignores the way Billy is staring at him, ignores the drum of fingers on his dash, and ignores Billy in general-- right up until he starts talking.

"Plans, huh? Going over to Byers' again?"

"Nah," Steve says. "He's going out with Nancy."

"Then what's more important to *King Steve* than making those little dweebs happy?"

Billy is sideways in his seat, staring right at him as he drives. Steve knows that Billy is still just trying to unravel him, trying to get under his skin, *see what makes him tick*, and while Steve is still lost as to the *why*, he thinks he might have just had an epiphany.

"Sorry, that answer is only available for guys who aren't racist assholes--"

Billy's nostrils flare. "I told you, it isn't about that shit--"

-- or for assholes in general. I mean, why would I share any of my deep, dark, painful secrets with a dick like you?"

Billy's eyes narrow, and Steve knows he's catching on before he even opens his mouth. "What do I get? If I apologize, what do I get?"

"A clearer conscience?"

"*Harrington* --"

"One question that I answer completely and honestly," Steve says. "If you apologize to Lucas. And you have to fucking mean it."

"Make it two and I'll apologize to you."

Steve blinks, gaze flitting over to him and then back to the road. "Think you can make it convincing enough for me to buy it?"

"Oh, Harrington." Billy chuckles, shaking his head, and this is a smile Steve has yet to see before, charming and lazy and smooth. "You ain't got any idea how sweet I can be."

Swallowing, Steve's fingers flex over the steering wheel. "Starting to think I don't want to."

"Make it two and I'll apologize to every one of those little idiots, nice and proper, for being a dick, Harrington." Steve sees Billy lick his lips out of the corner of his eyes, sees Billy lean closer, and can feel the heat of him on his right. "Promise."

"Jesus, yeah, alright."

"I'm sorry," Billy says, eyes on Steve's face, darting over his cheeks, his nose, his eyes, as if looking for the trauma he'd caused in Steve's features, and Steve is struck by the earnesty, the honesty, that follows despite the harsh clip of Billy's tone. "I got carried away, was already riled, and took it out on you and yours. I was pissed at Max-- for running off, for getting me into shit with my pops-- and taking it out on you was easier."

Steve blinks, staring straight ahead at the snow hitting his windshield, his throat working.

"Don't get me wrong," Billy adds, brows up, eyes narrowed. "Whatever you were all up to was freaky, and I'd probably beat your ass if you ever lied to my face like that again-- Sinclair's, too, if he ever lays a hand on Max-- but I probably wouldn't take it that far."

"Probably?"

Billy shrugs a shoulder when Steve glances over. "Hopefully."

"And you think *that's* a good apology?"

"Never said anything about good, Harrington." Billy grins as he plops back in his seat, sprawling out and pulling the cigarette from behind his ear to light up. "You said make it convincing. And you

wouldn't believe I was sorry, not genuinely, for it all, would you?"

Steve considers that, lips thin, and then waffles his head. "I guess you've got a point."

"So," Billy drags in a deep breath, grinning as he exhales. "Am I forgiven?"

"Not even fucking close," Steve snorts. "But you can ask a question."

Billy stares at him, propped between the back of the passenger seat and the door, taking another slow pull from his cigarette before gesturing with a jut of his chin. "What are you doing tonight?"

It startles a burst of laughter out of him, Steve's eyes darting between Billy and the road a couple of times before he shakes his head, grin lopsided. "*Really ? That's one of your questions.*"

"Didn't wanna push my luck."

"Jesus, alright," Steve snorts to himself. "After we get your shit worked out, I'm going to go play a few mindless hours of DnD with the shitheads, and then I plan to go back to my very empty house and get high as a fucking kite."

"That's your fucking plan for the night?" Billy frowns, looking a bit cheated, and Steve shrugs with his entire face.

"Well... yeah."

"What a fucking waste of-- I'm changing goddamn my question."

"Ah, ah, ah. Sorry, pal, already payed in full." Steve shakes his head as he pulls into a spot outside the Hargrove residence. "Now, go get your jumper cables so I can ditch you already."

Billy snorts, all but stabbing out his lit cigarette into Steve's quickly filling ashtray. He glares for as long as it takes to climb out of Steve's car, slamming the door shut behind him, and Steve starts laughing the second he's gone, resting his head back in the seat and cranking the radio while he waits.

He's got his eyes closed, drumming mindlessly with Van Halen's *Hot for Teacher* , for maybe thirty seconds when there's a sudden knocking on the window next to him. He startles, jumping in his seat, and when he squints out the window, he can make out a looming figure that he recognizes as Max's step-father.

Hesitating, Steve jerks the car door open, peering up into the snowfall at Mr. Hargrove's scowling face. "Can I help you, Mr. Hargrove?"

Mr. Hargrove blinks down at him, recognition slow, and then he's slapping on a tight but charming smile. "Harrington, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"What are you doing parked outside of my house?"

"The cold killed Billy's car battery, sir." Steve says. "He's run inside to grab some jumper cables so we can get her going again."

"Ah," Mr. Hargrove nods, and then gestures to the house. "Why don't you come in from the cold for a minute, son? Better than wasting gas waiting out here."

"Right, sure. Thank you." Steve makes quick work of unbuckling and killing his engine, stepping out into the snow and shutting the door behind him before following Mr. Hargrove up the steps and into the house, wincing as Mr. Hargrove bellows down that hall for Billy.

"Have a seat, kid." Mr. Hargrove gestures to the table, mismatched chairs and all, and Steve smiles at the sight, finds it a little charming, as he grabs one. "You want a beer?"

"Oh, no, thank you, Mr. Hargrove." Steve shakes his head, rubbing his hands together, cold even from the short jog into the house. "I'm driving, so..."

"Smart man," Mr. Hargrove nods, digging in the fridge and pulling one out for himself; he cracks it open as he takes the seat across from Steve. "So, Harrington, I hear you're quite the man about town."

"Well, I don't know about that, sir--"

“Nonsense,” Mr. Hargrove smiles, uses all his teeth, and Steve can’t shake a feeling of unease that pits in his stomach. “My wife works down at the local salon. From what I understand, the young ladies are always talking about you.”

“Well, I--” Steve falters, spotting Billy where he’s frozen in the hallway, jumper cables in hand, and Steve clears his throat and puts on one of those smiles he’s used to charm a dozen different girls’ fathers over the years. “I like to keep my options open. Recently got out of a pretty serious relationship, but I like to think I’m back in the game.”

“Girl broke your heart?” Mr. Hargrove asks, lips pursing out of something that might’ve been sympathy, and Steve presses his mouth into a thin line and shrugs. “Ah, well, you’ll get over that. Plenty of fish in the sea. Right, kid?”

Steve blinks.

Plenty of bitches in the sea. Am I right ?

He shudders, forces another smile, and nods his head.

“Yes, sir.”

Finally, Billy seems to unstick himself, coming in and wagging the jumper cables. “Hey, pops, didn’t realize you’d be home so early.”

“Got too cold at the factory for work,” Mr. Hargrove glances back at him. “They sent us all home. You going to get that tin can of yours running?”

Billy’s jaw ticks tight, and he nods. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Don’t forget to get Max tonight while you’re out... doing whatever it is that you do.” Mr. Hargrove offers up one of those tight smiles Steve’s way. “It was nice to officially meet you, Mr. Harrington.”

“You too, sir.”

“Maybe a good, respectable young man like yourself could be a good

influence on my son.” Mr. Hargrove slaps Steve on the back as he stands, walking them both to the door. “He’s always getting himself into trouble.”

“Well,” Steve stops in the threshold, smiling up at Mr. Hargrove, none of it reaching his eyes. “What kind of teenagers would we be if we weren’t getting into trouble from time to time, right, sir?”

With a laugh, Mr. Hargrove nods, sending them out the door. “Don’t forget about your sister, Billy! I want her home by eight thirty!”

Billy waves a hand in acknowledgement, climbing into Steve’s passenger seat as Steve rounds to the driver’s side. He’s got the car in gear and is pulling away in three seconds flat, hands tight around the steering wheel, something tighter in his stomach that he can’t put words to.

Next to him, Billy’s staring out the windshield, still clutching the jumper cables. His jaw is tight, his toes tapping, and Steve wonders if he realizes just how heavy he’s breathing.

They’re two roads down and chugging along, radio white noise in the background, when Steve finally breaks the silence.

“So,” he clears his throat. “Your dad is a bit of a hardass, isn’t he?”

Billy snorts, tension draining suddenly as he lulls his head over to look at Steve. “You’ve no idea, Harrington.”

Steve quickly and quietly decides that maybe he doesn’t want to know.

When Billy’s car is up and running again, the Camaro and the Beamer the only vehicles in the lot, Steve calls over to where Billy is sitting in the driver’s seat, revving his engine to keep the battery going.

“Why’d you wait for me?” he asks. “Why didn’t you just ask Tommy or any of the other assholes you hang out with?”

Billy blinks at him, stepping out but leaving the Camaro running,

coming around to shut the hood and tuck the cables Steve is holding under his arm. The wind is whipping through, biting at whatever skin is uncovered, and Steve can't wait to curl up with the Shithead Squad for a night of stupidity if it means getting out of this cold.

Eyeing him, Billy scuffs his boot against his front tire, mouth shrugging where his shoulders don't. "You're the white knight, Harrington. Those other dicks would've laughed and left me to freeze-- I probably would've done the same. But you? I knew you wouldn't say no."

Steve hunts for something, some lie maybe, and when he doesn't find one he leans against the open edge of his door, letting snow flurry into his car. "A year ago, I would have. Said no, I mean. Would've laughed in your face, just like the rest of them."

Billy licks his lips, and they're both standing there freezing, but neither of them has stepped into their own cars yet as Billy drags his gaze down over Steve's *everything* . "What changed?"

"I did."

" *Why* ?"

"Sorry, Hargrove." Steve grins, already ducking into his car, shouting up at him through the growing snow. "Can't reveal *all* my cards. You haven't earned that secret, yet."

"Yet?" Billy asks, but he's grinning, a shark that's scented blood in the water, and Steve would like to blame the cold on the way his face warms, but he can't. "You implying I might?"

"Maybe," Steve says. "I guess we'll just have to see, won't we?"

And then he's shutting the car on Billy's grinning face, shifting into drive and leaving Billy in his rearview. He knows it won't be the last of him.

"I apologized," Billy says in lieu of a greeting when he slides into his seat next to Steve on Monday.

This is something Steve already knows. Lucas and Dustin hadn't stopped talking his ear off the whole way to school, cutting each other off and completing each other's sentences with the kind of energy that only thirteen year olds can have on a Monday morning.

From what Steve understood-- or could parse from the mad jumble of pre-pubescent boys going off in his passenger seats-- was that Billy had not only pulled Lucas aside when picking Max up on Friday night, but he'd apologized for *scaring the fuck* out of all them back in November, all while wrapping it up in a neat little promise-- *threat! He threatened us, Steve!* -- that if he ever found them up to shady shit with his step-sister again, *and didn't tell him first*, he would make them all regret it for the rest of their nerdy little lives.

It wasn't exactly Shakespeare, but Steve can't exactly say he expected any better.

"I heard."

Billy huffs, eyes narrowed. "So?"

"So," Steve drags it out, leg bouncing, and *he's nervous*, he realizes, about what Billy could ask this time. "You've got one more question."

And Billy is already leaning forward, getting closer, and Steve's jaw clenches as Billy cants his head over to study Steve's face while Steve resolutely looks away. His heel taps against the tile floor, lips pursed, and Steve's heart has started going double time in his chest.

He thinks he's probably just made one of the biggest mistakes of his life, thinks Billy might ask him about last November and Steve will have to break the confidentiality contract he's signed away his life to, and then Billy asks:

"Why did you freak out at the party last Saturday and what did it have to do with the pool?"

And Steve feels an all new kind of dread knot in his stomach.

6. without my pride (I reach out from the inside)

Notes for the Chapter:

or:
the light; the heat (in your eyes)

WARNING: intense shit, homophobic slurs, Billy reaching out in his own really weird fucked up way

“ *Not here,* ” Steve had hissed, and in no uncertain terms, told Billy to wait until after school for his answer.

He'd narrowed his eyes, looked like he might press, but he must've seen the pallor of Steve's face or the trembling of his hands, because he'd pressed his lips thin and nodded once before turning away.

The rest of the day had gone by in a blur, right up until coming in sharp focus and clarity upon finding Billy leaning against his locker at the end of sixth period, hands tucked into his pockets, looking off down the hall so casually that it is obviously forced. Steve knows Billy sees him as he approaches, knows that he's tracking him out of the corner of his eye, as Steve stacks his textbooks away and snags his coat out of the bottom of his locker. As he shrugs it on and gestures with a jerk of his head to the double doors leading out to the parking lot.

Billy shoves off the line of lockers and follows, keeps close, like he's worried Steve might bolt any second. Steve's not so sure that the fear is unfounded. He feels like bolting.

It's still and quiet when they step out, other than the rush of students trying to get away from campus at the end of a long Monday. The clouds are heavy overhead, but while snowfall is a threat, the air is still and steady and stifling. Steve buries into his coat. Billy's boots crunch in the frozen, packed snow behind him.

Steve stops at the driver's side door, fidgeting with his keys, and he refuses to look up, even as Billy braces forward next to him, one hand pressed to the roof of the Beamer, the other at his hip, waiting in

Steve's space; expectant and impatient.

"You gonna fess up anytime soon or--"

"Not here," Steve says quickly. "And-- I gotta pick up the guys, you gotta get Max--"

"You're not weaseling outta your half of the deal, Harrington." Billy's nostrils flare, and when Steve looks up, his jaw is wound tight. "You give me what's owed, or I take it out of your hide--"

"Shut up, I know." Steve snaps, fingers curling tight around his keys, the metal cold and digging into his palm. "I'm not *weaseling* out of anything. I'm just not talking about it here, where any shithead in a five foot radius can overhear."

"You that embarrassed?" Billy lifts a brow, grin sharp.

"Get your hand off my fucking car, Hargrove." Steve says, and Billy's eyes widen slightly, burn over Steve's face as he sways slightly forward, barking out a short laugh and planting his feet like he's ready for Steve to shove him. "I'm gonna pick up Dustin; you're gonna pick up Max. When we're done, I'll meet you at the diner just outside of town. Understand?"

Billy's hand fists abruptly into the front of his jacket, jerking him around and pushing him back against the side of the Beamer. Grunting on impact, Steve winces and leans as far back as he can as Billy crowds in close, their knees knocking.

They're breathing each other's air, Billy's breath fogging between them, and Steve's got his hands up, already in surrender. He's not going to make the mistake of throwing the first punch again. Steve's pulse is hammering for a reason outside of nerves, and he's almost grateful for it, even when his ears start ringing. Billy jerks him, a hard press of muscle pushing Steve painfully back against the icy metal of his car.

"Let's get things straight, Harrington." Billy sneers, upper lip curling as his hands fist tighter into the front of Steve's coat. "I'll play this stupid fucking game with you, but you aren't making the rules. Am I

clear?”

“Foggy at best,” Steve says, and he’s flush with anger, just like Billy now, and Billy’s starting to smile like he can’t believe the gaul Steve always seems to have. “I’m not talking about this here, Hargrove. Take it or leave it, but I’ll be at the diner in twenty.”

He shoves Billy off, jerking his jacket back straight, and Billy stares at him, hip cocked and practically bouncing on his toes, tongueing the inside of his cheek as he grins, his fingers twitching at his sides. Steve’s chest is still heaving.

“Twenty minutes,” Billy says. “You’re not there...? Well, we both know I know where you live.”

He backs away one step, then two, then turns and starts heading for the Camaro. Steve’s hands have curled into fists at his sides.

“Find some new material!” Steve calls after him, face hot and chest tight. “The threats are getting real *fucking* old!”

Billy flips him off without looking back.

Billy’s Camaro is nowhere to be seen when Steve pulls into one of the empty spots outside of the diner and jogs inside. He smiles placidly at the waitress behind the counter and slides into one of the ratty booths facing the door on the far end, his back to the wall.

By the time Billy rolls up, engine growling outside, Steve has a cup of coffee and two pieces of pie on the way with an order of fries to follow. He unloads way too much sugar and creamer into his mug, watching as Billy swaggers in, cigarette smoke still clinging to him, and Steve wishes he had something harder to mix in with his coffee as Billy pours himself into the seat across from him and tosses his keys onto the table between them like a gauntlet.

“Well?” Billy lounges, spreading his arms over the cracked vinyl back of the seat, gesturing lazily with a shrug of his face. “I’m here, Harrington. Get talking.”

Steve takes his time drinking his coffee, watching Billy eye him from across the table, a familiar twisting in his stomach making his tongue feel heavy and too big in his mouth. He smiles tightly as the waitress stops by, setting two large slices of cherry pie down in front of both of them, and sets his mug aside to unwind a fork with crooked tines from the paper napkin holding it together with a dull knife.

Brow arched, Billy follows the fork from Steve's plate up to his mouth, and then he's scoffing out a laugh, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the table and scratching the side of his nose as he takes in the rest of the diner's scattered occupants. Steve already knows he'll see the same things he did-- the trucker by the window, the old couple huddled up at the bar top, the two gentlemen playing chess in the corner. No one close enough to overhear unless they started yelling at each other. No one paying either of them any mind.

"Never figured you for a cheap date kinda guy, princess." Billy says, stabbing at the cherry filling of his pie, picking the crust aside. "You take all the pretty girls here, or am I just special?"

Steve takes another pull from his coffee, refusing to rise to the bait, hands a bit unsteady and gaze cast down on his pie as he picks at it.

"Last fall, right around when I first started dating Nancy Wheeler, my parents went out of town, so I invited her and a couple of friends over to get drunk about two days after Will Byers went missing."

Billy falters, setting his fork down.

He waits, sitting quiet as Steve chews through another bite. He laces his fingers together in front of himself, braced forward, head cocked.

Steve doesn't think he's ever had someone's undivided attention like this. He clears his throat, licking the tacky cherry flavor from where it sticks to his own front teeth.

"I didn't say she couldn't bring a friend, so she did. Nancy and Barb were connected at the hip, had all the same classes, were always eating lunch together and hanging out in the halls-- right up until Nancy started dating me." Steve says, leg bouncing slightly beneath the table. "She was a cute girl. Tall, redhead, not my type.

Everyone thought she had a crush on Nancy-- thought she was one short haircut away from being a dyke. I think-- Carol probably started those rumors. She's always been a bit of a bitch."

Billy snorts but doesn't say anything, eyes narrowed on Steve's face.

Steve can't take the scrutiny, so he looks down, staring at the mess Billy's made of his pie crust and the smears of red across his plate.

"So, I invite Nancy over and she brings Barb. We drink for a while, goof off by the pool, you know, normal shit, and uh... Well, one thing leads to another, and Tommy and Carol go off to do whatever the fuck it is Tommy and Carol do, while Nancy and I..."

Steve risks a glance up, the tips of his ears burning, but Billy isn't leering. Isn't even grinning.

Steve clears his throat again. "Nancy ends up telling Barb off, and I think *oh, she's left*, right? Because I end up with Nancy in my room, and... Well, it doesn't matter what happened in my room. What matters is that-- that Barb *didn't leave*."

His voice cracks. Billy makes some kind of sound, at the back of his throat, and the vinyl of the seat *creaks* beneath him as he moves, a booted toe bumping into Steve's sneaker.

He doesn't look up. Can't. He hunches in on himself, the grip on his mug so tight that his fingers have locked up and started to ache. He can hear his pulse in his ears. Can taste tin at the back of his mouth.

"What happened to her?" Billy asks after a long moment, and Steve's head shoots up, his eyes wide. "The girl, Barb... what happened to her?"

"She, uh..." Steve's voice is rough, his laugh bitter, and Billy *won't stop looking at him*. "Official story is, she ran off that night, went missing, ended up getting caught up in the same-- the same, uh, *chemical leak* that shut down that military lab off in the woods."

Billy hums, leaning that much more forward. "And what actually happened, Harrington?"

And Steve's throat closes up. He's never voiced this before-- not to

Nancy; not to anyone-- and knows it isn't exactly true. But it's how he feels. It's what he believes to be true. A guilt he's never put words to.

He doesn't know if he can.

"She may have gone missing... *her body* might've gone missing..." Steve hears himself saying, whispering, voice a hiss of breath between him and Billy Hargrove. "But Barbara Holland died in my pool."

For a long time, Billy doesn't say anything. He's sitting there, across from Steve, and their waitress has come and gone-- setting down a coke for Billy and a basket of fries between them. Her gaze lingers on Billy, on his chest beneath the stretch of white cotton over the lines of muscle underneath, but Billy doesn't seem to notice. He keeps staring at Steve, one finger tapping on the worn table between them, and Steve knows he must be itching for a cigarette-- Steve certainly is.

His coke sits untouched, sweating and leaving a pool on the table around the base of the glass. The fries are cold, and Steve keeps picking at them, half-heartedly dipping them in ketchup, his shoulders up to his ears and his leg bouncing beneath the table.

"Okay," Billy says, eventually, and Steve doesn't have the energy to lift his head, so he peers up at him through his lashes, arms crossed on the table in front of him. "Okay, so... So, some girl dies in your pool, and now you-- Now you're, what? Fucked in the head about it? You change your dastardly, wicked ways of old and become Mr. Perfect, guardian angel of sad little nerds everywhere?"

Steve snorts out a laugh, reaching over the table and dragging Billy's soda over, taking a long drink from the straw. His mouth is dry, his body heavy, and he wants nothing more than to go home, curl up, and drink himself to sleep.

"Something like that," he rasps when he's finished a good half of the glass, pushing it back toward Billy. "It's a bit more complicated

than--”

“Did you kill her?”

Steve nearly chokes on his own tongue. “ No !”

“Then what’s the deal, Harrington?” Billy frowns. “Why the fuck are you so torn up about this?”

“It-- She-- *God*, you really are a bastard.” Steve digs into his back pocket, fumbling out a ten and slapping it down on the table as he pushes out of the booth.

He’s storming out of the diner, letting his feet carry him out the door and into the growing dark of evening, ignoring Billy’s voice calling after him. It follows him out into the cold, and the bite of winter is a relief against Steve’s skin.

Head tipped back, he takes a breath like he’s drowning. He thinks maybe he was, there for a moment, lost in the past and the guilt. He stares up at the clouds, thinking there should be stars. He can’t remember the last time there was a clear night in Hawkins.

The door chimes behind him, and Steve jerks into movement. He fumbles for his keys, digging them out of his coat where it’s draped over his arm. His teeth are pressed so tight together as he stands at the driver’s side door that his temples throb. He’s jerking on the door handle, trying to wrench it open, get inside, drive away, and then there is a hand over his.

Steve stills, heart rattling in his chest, and Billy is a hot presence at his side, breath fogging his vision. His hand is big over Steve’s, the knuckles scarred, and Steve remembers how jarring it had been when Billy finally landed a punch. Remembers how it felt like his eyes might explode; how his vision swam; how, for weeks after, his head had felt swollen, his skin too tight, his lower lip numb. His breath catches, now, and Billy’s fingers tighten over his.

“Easy, Harrington.” Billy mutters, voice low, soft and coaxing. “C’mon. C’mere.”

He takes Steve’s wrist in hand. His grip is firm but not unyielding.

Tight but not bruising.

He pulls Steve stumbling over to the Camaro, opens the passenger door, and urges Steve inside. The door shuts behind him softly, and Steve watches, numb, as Billy rounds the hood of the car to climb into the driver's seat.

He starts the car but doesn't put it into drive. Instead, he turns the radio down and the AC up, lets heat fill the cab, and twists in his seat to watch Steve. Steve's teeth are chattering, his skin red from the cold, and Billy is quiet.

"You're shaking," he says.

"It's cold," Steve replies.

Billy sighs, flopping back in his seat, finally facing away. Steve risks a glance toward him, finds Billy's eyes forward. Staring, listless, out the windshield.

"Okay," Billy repeats, voice so hushed it's nearly a whisper, and Steve isn't sure if he's talking to himself or talking to Steve. "Okay, so, this girl, Barb, dies in your pool under mysterious fuckin' circumstances that have something to do with that freaky lab that closed before Christmas. A year and a half later, you're at a party, you get shitfaced, and people start diving head first into the pool outside, and you lose it. Right?"

Steve swallows. "Right."

"Right."

Steve watches Billy's throat work. Watches his chest fill with one long breath, and looks away as he lets it back out.

He hears the *snick* of a lighter, smells the smoke, and blinks as a lit cigarette is shoved into his face. Hesitating, Steve takes it between his fingers, darting a furtive look in Billy's direction, and takes one long drag.

It goes down rough, and he nearly sputters, coughing a bit into the back of his hand. Billy chuckles, hand out to take it back when

Steve's done, and Steve passes it back with watering eyes.

"That's gotta be the worst fucking--" Steve coughs again, and Billy's teeth are bright and white when he grins. " *The worst fucking brand, Jesus.*"

"The cheaper the better," Billy grunts, hissing around a pull of his own, and he's twisting back around to look at Steve again, elbow digging into the headrest, left arm draped over the top of the wheel as he holds the cigarette back out.

Steve takes it without any hesitation this time.

"So," Billy mutters, eyes on Steve's mouth while he pulls in a heady lungful. "What else?"

"What else?" Steve lifts a brow, head swimming a bit, and he lets it lull back against the headrest. "What do you mean, what else?"

"That can't be it, Harrington." Billy gestures to him with a hand, plucking the cigarette from Steve's outstretched fingers. "S'gotta be more to it."

"A girl dying isn't *enough* for you?" Steve's nose wrinkles up, tone clipping short as he bristles even though Billy is right, and Billy is grinning again, taking a few puffs and passing the rapidly diminishing cigarette back.

"Oh, it's fucked up, alright." Billy says, nodding, and Steve *does* sputter when Billy speaks next. "You know, pissed off is a real good look on you, pretty boy."

"Jesus, you're twisted." Steve sneers, jerking the ashtray out of the dash and stamping the cigarette out with a huff. "If we're done here?"

His hand is on the door handle, ready to get out and walk back to his car now that he's calmed back down. He falters only because, when he goes to get out, Billy's voice *breaks* .

"I watched my dad beat a kid half to death back in California," and Steve jerks around, eyes wide on Billy's face, hunting for any kind of

lie as Billy lights up another cigarette and drags deep. "Friend of mine. Older guy. Sold me booze at a good price. Weed at a better one."

Steve shuts the door again.

"Why?" he asks.

Billy shrugs a shoulder, and he's resting his head back again, grin lopsided. For the first time, Steve notices that it doesn't reach his eyes.

"Dunno," he says, squinting at the lit end of his cigarette. "Cuz he was black. Cuz he was queer. Cuz he was *there* . Does it matter?"

"Does your dad--?"

"Easy, princess." Billy's head rocks to the side, and he directs a dangerous, wolfish grin Steve's way that makes him shiver. "We've both got secrets to keep, don't we?"

Steve swallows, wetting his lips, breathing out unsteadily.

"But the point is," Billy pulls long and hard again, flicking the ashes into the tray with a lazy motion. "After, that guy, he had this... this *look* in his eyes, right? Dead. Quiet. *Not there* ."

Billy is staring at him, *hard*, and Steve wants to vibrate right out of his skin under the intensity of it.

"And sometimes, Harrington, *you* get that look."

Steve shudders. His fingers curl tight in his lap.

Billy's lips purse.

"You're fucked up, Harrington. And, hey, hell knows I am." Billy says, and Steve's chest feels tight as he smiles. "But *you* ... you've still got something hiding in you. *Riiight* under the surface. And that fire, *that heat* ... it'll eat you alive if you're not careful."

Steve's brows furrow over his eyes, dark and searching. "Oh, yeah,

because you're the *poster boy* for well-balanced mental health."

"You don't wanna be like me, Harrington, and I'm not telling you to." Billy says, so serious and so firm, that Steve is at a loss. "You've seen what can happen. Do you really wanna risk letting it?"

And Steve already knows the answer.

He thinks about it that night, tossing and turning in bed, until he can't stay lying down anymore.

His house is empty when he goes downstairs. Empty when he walks from the foyer, to the kitchen, to the living room where the curtains are drawn over the backdoors the lead out to the backyard.

Empty when he rips them open, staring out through the glass, to the steam rising into the night from the placid, calm waters of the pool.

And Steve already knows the answer.

"Friday," Steve says, cornering Billy at his locker, determination threatening to choke him even as Billy blinks at him with wide eyes. "After dropping off the kids at the Wheeler's. The junk yard."

Billy stares at him, and then he's grinning so wide Steve thinks he might eat him.

"Okay?" Steve asks, wavering.

Billy nods. "Okay."

7. The Heat of the Moment (showed in your eyes)

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for being so patient! Not a long update, but next chapter is a killer, so hopefully I'm forgiven.

"I don't understand."

Steve sighs, rubbing his hand down over his face, the other on his hip as Dustin stares up at him, mittens still on, a floppy hat covering his curls and his ears from the short walk between Steve's car and the Wheeler's basement.

"What, *specifically*, don't you understand?" Steve asks.

Dustin scowls, fists planting on his hips, and Steve wants to laugh at how *familiar* the gesture looks-- like looking into a very short, very curly haired mirror. "Steve Harrington, this is the second time *in a row* that you've skipped out or missed out on a Party gathering. I can only keep the democracy from voting you out for *so long*."

Steve *does* laugh at that. "Vote me out?"

"Don't take it so lightly," Dustin wags a mitten at him. "It's been done before."

Lucas snorts where he's stripping out of his bulky winter coat. "*When?*"

"Summer of '81." Dustin insists.

Mike groans. "We didn't *vote you out*. You were *grounded*."

"Not helping!" Dustin's arms are everywhere, and Steve steps back to avoid being collateral.

Steve's still laughing. "Sorry, guys, but I've got plans--"

Dustin scoffs. "*Plans!* Always with the plans! Who do you have to hang out with outside of *us*?"

Steve wants to argue, wants to say he's got plenty of friends outside of a small group of ridiculous middle schoolers and monster hunting buddies, but he realizes it's a lie before it's even fully formed on his tongue. He's got Nancy and Jonathan, but he's intruded on them enough, and what acquaintances he's got at school, aren't people he'd want to hang out with on a Friday night. Not anymore.

Truth is, he'd rather go on stupid, imaginary adventures with these dweebs than party another weekend away.

"Hi, Steve!" Max greets as she bolts past, over to where Will and Lucas are setting up, and Steve waves before focusing on Dustin.

"I've got plenty of friends outside of you losers," Steve says.

Dustin's eyes narrow; his arms cross. "Like *who*?"

Steve startles under the weight of an arm being draped so casually over his shoulders, eyes wide as they fly to the side of Billy's grinning face. "Like me. Ain't that right, *Steve*?"

And Steve feels just as rattled as Dustin looks, eyes wide and mouth gaping open up at them. He can feel the heat of Billy radiating against his side even through the layer of cold still clinging to him from the winter night settling in outside.

Billy meets Steve's eyes and gives his shoulders a squeeze. *Play along*, it says. *Play it up*, says the challenging lift of Billy's brow, and Steve relaxes under the weight around his shoulders, feeling lighter than he had all week.

"Like Billy," Steve grins down at Dustin, and Dustin sputters.

"But he'll contaminate you! Seduce you back to the Dark Side! And then you'll go back to being a-- a blockheaded... *jock*!"

Dustin spits the word with such vehemence that Steve has to *hide* his laugh behind a hand.

At his side, Billy snorts, busying himself with brushing some of the snow on his collar away. "Better than hanging out with *you* geeks."

“*First of all* ,” Dustin points a mitten at him. “We’re *nerds* , not *geeks* . And secondly, Steve, *see* ?”

“Okay, okay, okay.” Steve holds out his hands, but he’s brimming with warm amusement, and it’s suffusing his entire body. “I’ll make you a deal to prove I’m not going off the deep end.”

Dustin crosses his arms; waiting.

“My parents are back in town Sunday, so that’s a wash-- *but* ...” Steve raises his hands higher, placating and patient as Dustin moves to protest more. “But I’ve got no homework this weekend, so Saturday I’ll take you and whoever else to the arcade and school your ass at *Gauntlet* . Okay?”

Whipping his glove off, Dustin scrambles to spit into his palm and hold it out. “Spit shake on it.”

Steve’s nose wrinkles up, and Billy *cackles* next to him. “Absolutely *not* ,” Steve says.

“You gotta swear to it, Steve!”

“He’s right,” Will nods sagely, and Mike looks nothing but amused at his side.

With a low groan and a roll of his eyes, Steve spits into his own hand, face twisting up as Dustin takes it in his own with a wet *smack* . “*Disgusting* ,” Steve says at the same time as Max.

Billy is *trembling* against him, going so far as to hide his smile against Steve’s shoulder. He can feel the heat of his laughter, even through the thick layer of his wool sweater, and he shudders as he dries his palm off against his pant leg.

“If that’s all?” Steve asks.

Dustin bobs his head. “See you at eight!”

They all say goodbye in one way or another. Dustin is already eagerly talking to Mike about hunting for change before the night’s up, and Steve smiles as long as it takes for the arm still draped over

him to squeeze again and urge him into motion.

When Steve looks at Billy, he can see he's gathered himself some, but is shifting from foot to foot. Eager to make an escape. Eager to get out of there. Eager to get to the junkyard for whatever it is Steve's kept tight lipped about all week.

It isn't like Billy hasn't tried to pry it out of him already. He's dropped hints about *Friday night* for days, like it was going out of style, pestering Steve at every turn-- in class, at his locker, even during lunch-- elated, apparently, at whatever heat Steve's eyes had promised Tuesday morning after the diner.

Steve lets Billy coax him toward the stairs that lead up and out of the Wheeler basement, and the trepidation curls low in Steve's stomach. He wonders if this is a good idea or a monumentally *stupid* one, and thinks it's probably some combination of both.

They're two steps up and out, Billy rummaging around with his free hand in a pocket for his smokes, when Max speaks up.

"Billy?" she asks, and when they turn, she's at the base of the stairs, pulling at the long sleeves of her shirt. "Do you think you can--?" her mouth twists, and then she spreads her feet a bit, expression firming. "I want to go, too. To the arcade. Tomorrow."

Steve feels more than he sees the way Billy stiffens. Feels it and feels something twist in his gut.

Then, Billy is shrugging, loose and easy and the picture of nonchalance when Steve glances at him. "Sure, punk. Ask your mom tonight and we'll see."

Something bright and beautiful blossoms over Max's face, then, and she rocks up onto her toes. "Rad. See you at eight."

"Whatever," Billy says around the end of an unlit cigarette that he's shoved between his lips, eyeing Max as she lingers. "I ain't gonna spit shake on it or anything."

Max's face twists up again, cheeks flushing, and she's flipping them off as Billy chortles and tugs Steve up the stairs with him.

"You're disgusting," Steve says once they're out in the cold, walking toward the Beamer, and Billy is laughing and smoking as he trails after him.

"C'mon, Harrington." Billy's eyes are bright, *dancing*, in the dimming light of dusk, with Mrs. Wheeler's disappointed *oh, you're leaving already* still following after their wake. "You gotta admit she's hot. For a mom."

"Not my type," Steve insists as he unlocks the Beamer. "Get in, I'm driving."

Billy doesn't protest the way Steve expects. He even pauses long enough to stamp out his cigarette before climbing into the passenger seat.

They're a mile in, a mile from the Wheeler's place, when Billy shifts in his seat to face Steve, the low, steady beat of The Zombie's *Time of the Season* fading in to thrum below their voices. Steve keeps his hands on the wheel, but can't help but laugh sharply when Billy asks:

"So, what is your type, Harrington?"

"Jesus, *what*?"

"Your type," Billy says. "I wouldn't've pegged you for mousy and boring, but if you're *actually* screwing around with Wheeler and Byers--"

"I'm not," Steve says. "And, trust me, *neither* of them are mousy or boring. Jonathan split my face open way before you did."

"*Byers*?" Billy's nose scrunches up. "Huh. Wouldn't've guessed that. Granted, you can't fight for shit."

"Shut up."

"But seriously," Billy *thwaps* him on the shoulder with the back of a hand, and Steve wonders when they crossed the line into casual touches like this-- if it was at the diner, when Steve opened himself

up raw, or if it was somehow before that. “You’ve got a limited amount of real estate in this shithole town, so. What’s your type?”

“Not my ex-girlfriend’s *mom* , that’s for damn sure.”

Billy grins with all his teeth. Steve thinks he looks kind of like a kid, giddy and delighted, and a bit deranged, like a predator gone too long without food.

He thinks about it, though, as the track rolls over into something by Fleetwood Mac his mother liked back in her flower child youth. He thinks about his string of casual exes, who he never felt more than momentary interest for during the chase. He thinks about Nancy and her hidden *spark* , and shifts a bit in his seat.

Nothing ever quite lit a fire under his ass the way Nancy Wheeler had with a gun in her hand. So he says:

“Someone who can kick my ass.”

And Billy snorts, something like disbelief on his face, and he eyes Steve for a long moment as Stevie Nicks *croons* . He shifts back around to face forward, fingers drumming against his thigh, and doesn’t say anything until Steve is pulling up on the junkyard.

“So what are we even doing here?” Billy asks.

“You’ll see.”

Steve stops when his headlights hit the side of a familiar bus. He pulls into park and kills the engine, leaving the lights on, but he strips out of his sweater as Billy eyes him again.

“The fuck are you doing?”

“Come on. Get out.”

He’s climbing out of the driver’s seat before Billy can ask him anything else, and the cold is biting through the cotton of his shirt, but he knows it won’t for long. Rubbing his hands together to keep them from freezing, he rounds to the back of the Beamer and pops the trunk as Billy steps out.

Ducking in, Steve pulls aside the ratty, old blanket he'd thrown across the tools in the back, and he hears Billy suck in a breath through his teeth when he spots what's beneath it. A crowbar, a tire iron, and, of course, a bat riddled with nails.

"The *fuck*, Harrington?" And Steve looks up to see Billy staring with wide eyes. "Did you bring me out here for a rematch?"

"No," Steve laughs, grabbing the crowbar and holding it out. "No, nothing like that."

Billy takes the crowbar slowly, fingers curling loosely and then *tightly* around the metal. "Why the *fuck* do you even have something like that in your *trunk*?"

"Oh, y'know," Steve shrugs, snapping the trunk closed on the bat with a *snap*. "In case some idiot blows into town thinking he needs to knock the resident king down a few pegs when he already graciously stepped aside."

Billy scoffs, but he's weighing the crowbar in his hands, eyes still on the trunk. "What's the plan, here, princess?"

"Well," Steve scratches the back of his head, and now that he's standing here, this whole plan seems more than a little stupid. "I thought about it. What you said, on Monday, about-- about not, uh... being like you. Not, y'know, snapping like you did."

Billy looks away, to the side, and exhales tightly through his nose. He thumps the crowbar lightly against the side of his own knee, jaw clenching.

Steve swallows. "And I also thought you were right. About-- About, I dunno, whatever heat-- or, or rage or whatever the fuck you said was... was in me."

The eyes that meet his are sharp and dark. Billy cants his head, wets his lips, and shuffles closer a step. Steve swallows again, a bit thicker, but straightens out to bring himself to his full height, and Billy takes a more confident step into his space.

He brings the crowbar up between them, gaze keen as it skirts down

over Steve, standing in the cold in his jeans and his black t-shirt and his sneakers. His grin is sly, then, just shy of dangerous, and Steve shivers for reasons beyond the plummeting temperature.

“You sure you didn’t bring me out here to throw down again, Harrington?” he asks, breath a wash of heat over Steve’s face.

“Not-- Not exactly,” Steve hesitates, then reaches up to grip the crowbar. “But I thought maybe-- maybe we might find a better way to... to work through our shit. To release a little aggression.”

“And how do you suggest we do that?”

It’s impossible to miss, standing this close. The way Billy shifts, spreads his feet, like he’s gearing for the fight he seems to be itching for. The way his eyes drop, from Steve’s eyes, to his mouth.

Something pulls taut in his chest, neck feeling suddenly hot. Something thrumming and deep and terrifying-- as terrifying as anything the Upside Down ever spat out at them-- stringing tight, tight, *tight* within him, and Steve doesn’t understand the harsh beat of his heart against his ribs.

He doesn’t understand it. But he knows how to use it.

“Like this,” he says, sliding the crowbar from Billy’s lax grip, stepping back.

It takes him approximately five seconds to stride across the frozen patches of grass and dirt of the desolate junkyard and over to one of the long abandoned cars piled with scraps. It takes him less than that to rear back with the crowbar over his shoulder and bring it down again, teeth baring as he strikes down on the rusted hood and it *rings* up his arms.

He pulls back and swings again. Then again. Then again. Then, shifts his aim, and shatters one of the headlights. The crash of glass is much more satisfying.

Behind him, Billy whoops out a sound, clapping.

An ugly sound leaves him as he throws himself into the next hit. He

shatters the already fractured windshield, blood singing, and does it again and again and again, until only the broken frame of glass remains.

Steve swings until his arms feel like jelly, until something twisted in him finally *gives* , and he realizes that he's panting and breathless and sweating as he steps back to admire the damage. His fingers are cramped up, his pulse pounding in his ears, and his palms are slick on the end of the crowbar, the metal so cold it *burns* . His breath is a mist of heat in front of his flush face, his chest heaving, body on fire and head a dizzy, satisfied *hush* .

He smiles, then, all thoughts of beasts and little girls in labs *gone* . At least for the moment.

Turning, he looks back at where Billy is still by the Beamer. His arms are crossed against the cold, the headlights of the Beamer haloing his curls in streaks of gold and red, and he's watching Steve with an avid gaze. He almost looks hungry, and Steve thinks distantly that he might be. That he might be starved.

So he grins, cheeky and still out of breath, and holds the crowbar out with a weak, trembling arm.

"Wanna give it a go?" he asks.

Billy eyes don't leave his face as he strips out of his jacket, movements sure and steady, tossing it over the hood of the Beamer carelessly, and he strides across the junkyard to stand in front of Steve. He seems a little out of breath too, though Steve can't guess why. His gaze searches, *hunts* , over Steve's face.

Then, he holds out a hand, palm up. "Give me that."

Steve does.

Steve hadn't understood, not really, what Billy had meant about *fire* , until he'd seen Billy lay into one of the other cars. Not until he'd seen Billy's eyes when they'd finished. Not until they were driving back to the Wheeler's house, nursing nothing more than a bit of

windchill and a few blisters, and the *warmth* , the *content* , on Billy's face was apparent in the way he crooned along with The Rolling Stones Steve had blaring over the radio.

He didn't understand until, after Steve had pulled into park in front of the Wheeler's house, Billy had turned to him with eyes so bright they were like stars, and asked:

"When can we do that again?"

8. I got to be your friend now, baby

Notes for the Chapter:

aka: all I know is that to me (you look like you're lots of fun)

aka: Part 1 of chapter 8 because this fucker is so goddamn long, I'm so fucking sorry, guys, there's already another 2k sitting after this and it's barely met the halfway point for this chapter.

Billy is leaned back, all casual lines and an easy grin, against the side of the Camaro when Steve rolls up in the Beamer. The sun is still high in the sky, spring right around the corner, and they've been doing this for three weeks now, whenever they both have the free time to meet up on the outskirts of town and blow a few hours at the junkyard.

He takes a final drag from his cigarette when Steve steps out, flicking it to the ground and stamping it out with a toe, grinding the butt into the dirt. His eyes are bright, brighter than when Steve passes him in the halls or ignores the not-so-subtle innuendos Billy throws his way during class, and he lifts the six pack of beer up in offering, one already missing and open on the hood of the Camaro behind Billy, the rest dangling from his fingers.

Steve snorts, but nods as he shuts his car door. Billy tosses him a can, and Steve cracks it open after he catches it, swallowing half of it down before it can foam over as he makes his way over to where Billy is waiting.

"If this is your surprise," Steve says instead of greeting him, wagging the can and leaning back against the Camaro at Billy's side, nursing his beer between phrases. "It's a good one, but not that surprising."

"You're easy to please," Billy shrugs, but he's pulling open the passenger door and hefting out a sledgehammer from the footwell as Steve's brows fly up. "But this is the surprise, pretty boy."

“You planning on bashing in my kneecaps?”

“I might, if you don’t get with the program.” Billy says, and Steve laughs because somehow this has become his new normal-- spending a few evenings a week with Billy Hargrove at the junkyard destroying shit together, needling at each other and goading one another into one more hit, one more swing, until they’re both exhausted.

Steve isn’t quite sure how, but somehow, he and Billy have become friends-- of a sort. What time he doesn’t spend with Nancy and Jonathan or the Shithead Squad has, somehow, become filled up with Billy Hargrove. With smoking and cursing and all of the uncouth behavior he knows his mother would purse her lips at. With expressing a little of what he’s been bottling up for years; not just the trauma of the Upside Down, but the years of pressure this small town has placed upon him and on all of them. The relief of it, of spending these nights with Billy trying to pry out something more wild from beneath Steve’s-- in Billy’s words-- *goddamn golden boy exterior* , has made his days smoother, his nights easier.

Though, the latter might have something to do with his parents having come home. Even with his mother’s usual chiding-- *Stevie, darling, you really should see to that wild hair of yours, and we really must take you shopping soon, everything you have is so outdated for spring* -- and his father’s gruffer *looking forward to learning the ropes this summer, son ?*, Steve’s felt more settled having them in the house with him.

It reminds him a bit of a time before the Upside Down, before death and decay had ever touched his life, and it makes him ache for a time when shooting the shit with Billy would’ve been something to do for *fun* -- and not just something that helps them cope.

“Give me that,” Steve says, finishing his beer and tossing the can aside before reaching for the smooth, wooden handle of the sledgehammer.

“Sure you can handle it, Harrington?” Billy waggles his brows, tongue between the edges of his teeth. “It’s pretty big.”

“And that’s, what, supposed to intimidate me?” Steve asks, hand still

out. “I think I’ve seen bigger.”

Billy laughs, offering the hammer out, and Steve thinks this is their new normal, too. The leering and the teasing-- *taunting* one another in a way that is almost flirtatious, riling one another up with words and looks and sometimes a shove or two, and Steve still hasn’t decided if there’s another layer to it or if Billy just rolls that way. On the knife edge of *too much* .

Steve grunts as the full weight settles into his grip, nearly dropping the damn thing, and he frowns down at the rusted head and tests his grip on it a bit. “Where did you even get this thing?”

“Nicked it from shop class,” Billy hooks his thumbs into his front pockets, lounging back against the Camaro to watch as Steve idly swings the sledgehammer back and forth to get a feel for it. “What do you think?”

“I think we’re gonna fuck some shit up,” Steve laughs.

“Ooh,” Billy’s shoulders bunch up and he feigns an over exaggerated shudder. “I love it when you talk dirty, princess.”

Billy gives him shit for bowing out early on their *regularly scheduled smash therapy* , but Steve has gotten used to not rising to the bait for more when he knows he has to pick up the kids or get home for dinner. Steve thinks, if it were up to Billy, they’d stay out at the junkyard tearing shit apart until the cows came home or the sun rose again.

He knows Billy had a point, about having something in him that needed to get out, but Steve thinks Billy has a lot more rage in him than Steve does. And, maybe, just as much *fear* .

He hadn’t realized it at first, not until they’d been out there four times in twice as many days, and Steve had been shaking when he’d finished whaling down on a poor, defenseless Volkswagen. He’d trembled so hard that, when he’d stopped, he’d dropped his trusty crowbar to the ground and nearly collapsed after it, except Billy had

been right there, right at his side, hand fisting in the front of Steve's shirt and asking *what's your trauma, Harrington?* and Steve had realized on a half-hysterical laugh that it wasn't just anger, wasn't just frustration, he'd been letting out. It had been all of his fear, his terror, that had plagued him mercilessly the evening before in the form of one of the worst nightmares yet, and from the *months of after the Upside Down* .

Because when he'd beat down, swinging until his arms and shoulders *screamed* for him to stop, it hadn't been the busted frame of a '52 Beetle he'd been laying into, but a flower faced monster that continued to plague him-- even a year after burning it to ash.

He thinks Billy does the same thing. Sees something that isn't there when he's unloading onto scrap metal. And Steve thinks Billy probably has a few years on him in the trauma department.

When Steve gets home, Billy's taunting *you bring the drinks, next time, pretty boy* far in his rearview, he sits in his car with the heat on low for a long while. He's still a bit keyed up, from the weight of the sledgehammer coming down so satisfyingly against metal, and he doesn't want to play twenty questions with his mother when she sees his flush face.

She likes to do this, whenever her and dad are home for an extended period of time, flitting about Steve in a tizzy of concern and affection-- like she's trying to pay him back for all of the days they've missed by being away. Dinner is an important affair, and they sit down for it every night that they're home, despite the discomfort it usually brings. Steve likes to think she's just trying to play house, trying to play at being the mother she isn't very good at being and forcing his dad into the role he isn't all that interested in playing. It's sweet, if a little heartbreaking, and Steve has long since stopped being bitter about it.

In her own way, she tries, and Steve appreciates that more than his father's cool indifference to everything but Steve following in his footsteps.

The second Steve opens the front door after finally climbing out of his car, he smells the smoke, and rushes to the kitchen without taking

his shoes or coat off. There's a potpie in the oven that's juices have boiled over, and without a baking sheet beneath it, has scalded on the bottom of the oven. The crust is singed around the edges, and Steve knows as he pulls it out with a hastily grabbed oven mitt that dinner is completely ruined.

"Mom!" he calls out, setting the pie onto the stovetop with a sigh, waving the oven mitt around to try and clear the smoke, and he receives no response. "Mama!"

A door opens upstairs, opera music pouring down to the first floor, and he hears a string of Italian curses follow after it, along with the neat sound of heels clipping down the stairway. "Oh, Steve, *mio caro*, I forgot!"

"It's--" Steve coughs, still waving the mitten, and his mother is a flurry of brown curls and big eyes and silk dressing gown as she rushes across to open the sliding glass door. "It's okay, mom. Not a big deal."

"But it is," his mother's voice is strained, lower lip between her teeth as she meets him in the kitchen. "Your father is working late, so I sent Sylvia on her way after she finished cleaning, and I was going to make your favorite just for you, Stevie. Oh, *porco cane*."

Steve knows from experience that, if she's breaking out the Italian, she definitely means it. He laughs anyways, fanning in front of his face as they stare down at the ruined remains of dinner, his mother's face buried in her hands next to him.

"I'm sorry, lovey," she sways into his side, and Steve wraps an arm around her and rubs at her shoulder. "I meant for it to be just the way you like it."

"Burnt to a crisp?" he asks.

She slaps a hand against his chest, and he's laughing again as she spits another curse at him. "*Dio santo, Stefano*! It is not funny!"

"It's a little bit funny," he soothes and she presses her forehead to his shoulder. "What happened?"

“Oh,” she huffs, and he lets her rest against his side. “You know how forgetful I am sometimes, darling. Lost in my own world, like your father says.”

Lost in her own head , his father has said, too many times to count, with a look of such disdain that Steve wonders why they haven’t left each other if they make one another so miserable sometimes.

Steve has known, for many years, how unhappy they make one another. How, away at college, his father had fallen for the half-Italian beauty from the big city, wooed her, knocked her up, and then married her out of duty. How he had not known of his mother’s moodiness, of her dipping and soaring personality, until after Steve had been born. How he’d been ashamed of her swinging emotions--so high and so low, without anything in between-- for years, but had played the dutiful husband and father for the world and kept his affairs private. How his mother’s own *flights of fancy* had stirred up more fights between them than happiness.

He loves his mother, dearly, but hopes whatever future he has does not hold the same sourness his parents’ own marriage does. He doesn’t think it’s fair, to either of them, to live like they do.

Lips pressed thin, he squeezes at her shoulders. “Don’t worry, mom. We’ll order pizza. Watch *Jeopardy* . I’ll even let you beat me at guessing the answers.”

“ *Let me* beat you?” she sniffs, nose turning slightly up. “Darling, you underestimate me.”

“Of course, mama.” Steve says. “Cheese or meat lovers?”

His mother beams. “Why not both?”

“You owe me a beer,” Billy says the next morning, thumbs hooked into the front pockets of his jeans, fingers splayed out over his thighs as he leans a shoulder against the line of lockers next to Steve’s. “Two, actually.”

“Oh, so we’re keeping count?” Steve asks without looking his way,

frowning as he hunts for his copy of *Jane Eyre* .

“Nah, I’m just reminding you that it’s your turn to provide, Harrington.” Billy leans around a bit, peering into Steve’s locker with a raised brow. “Y’know, I’m surprised you don’t have some medieval fucking weapon hiding in here, too.”

Steve snorts. “It wouldn’t fit.”

Billy blinks at him. “But you’d put one of those things in your locker if it did?”

Shrugging, Steve’s mouth mirrors his body, head bobbing a bit. “Yeah, sure. Might come in handy.”

“One of these days, Harrington,” Billy says, edging in, voice dropping, and Steve doesn’t even pull back, just keeps looking for his book in the chaos of his locker. “I’m gonna figure out what you’re so convinced is hiding around the corner.”

Steve’s smile is wry when he offers it up, and Billy actually returns it. “I *sincerely* doubt that.”

“The bogeyman? Bigfoot, maybe?” Billy rocks up on his toes, eyes flitting between Steve’s, smile going wide when Steve glances away. “Gimme a hint, here, Harrington. Am I close?”

“Not by a mile,” Steve lets out a little *ah-hah!* and snaps his locker shut after pulling his tattered copy of *Jane Eyre* free. “Also, I can’t make it tonight.”

“Left early last night, can’t make it tonight... geez, princess, it’s almost like you don’t wanna see me.” Billy says, one of those slow grins spreading over his face that’s all heat and no substance, and Steve rolls his eyes.

“There’s this... *thing* tonight, at the Byers’. Dinner and then-- other shit. DnD but, like, bigger.” Steve says; lies. “It’s a bit of a tradition. We do it once in a while, when we can all get together, and I really can’t bail.”

Billy grunts. “Max mentioned somethin’ like that.”

"I can--" Steve frowns, thumbing at the frayed end of the book's binding. "If you want, I can pick her up and drop her off."

"And miss out on a chance to make those losers squirm?" Billy's brow arches. "Not likely."

"You're twisted," Steve says.

"And you owe me alcohol, Harrington." Billy shoves off the locker, already backing away, grin cocky and lopsided and not quite meeting his eyes as he glances over Steve's shoulder. "Saturday. Don't forget or I'll--"

"Beat my ass, yeah, I got it." Steve waves him off, startling only when he turns to find Nancy hovering a few paces away, frown pinching her expression. "Nance. Hey."

"What's going on Saturday?"

"Oh, uh... nothing. Nothing interesting." Steve says, and he doesn't know why he's lying-- but he is. "Just dropping the munchkins off at the arcade."

He sees the moment Nancy sees right through it, her eyes narrowing, but she presses her shoulder to the lockers and crosses her legs at the ankles, the air of nonchalance despite her pursed lips. "So, you and Billy Hargrove are... friends, now?"

"Not--" Steve laughs, palming the back of his head, and glancing about the hall, like he's worried someone might be listening. "Not exactly. I mean, we're cool, now. Kind of. He apologized for beating my face in."

"And you forgave him?"

"Not exactly, no."

"But you're going to hang out with him," Nancy says. "On Saturday. And, what, drink the day away?"

"No, *no*, it's-- we--" Steve sighs, shoulders drooping. "It's hard to explain."

“As hard as demogorgons and Mind Flayers?” Nancy asks, words clipping in a harsh whisper, and Steve sags further. “Steve, I-- It’s just weird. You know that, right?”

Steve swallows and nods.

“I’m just worried,” she adds. “You two don’t have the best track record. *Billy* doesn’t have the best *any* record, and--”

“I get it, Nance, I do.” Steve says, throat tight. “It’s not-- We just... get together and shoot the shit and-- and he’s not too bad, when he’s not being a total tool, and we just... wreck some stuff at the junkyard--”

“ *What ?* Steve--”

“It’s not as crazy as it sounds,” Steve holds up a hand, and Nancy eyes him, brows drawn tight over her big eyes, lips pressing thin. “It-- It helps. Keeps me... I dunno, keeps me from going completely *bonkers* everyday.”

“And *bashing* shit in at a junkyard with *Billy Hargrove* isn’t bonkers?”

“ *No* , he-- It--” Steve groans, dragging a hand over his face and up into his hair. “Nance, don’t you ever just... feel like you’re gonna come right out of your own skin? Like there’s something *in you* , clawing to get out, to-- to *scream* or tear something up or *something* ?”

Nancy blinks a few times and Steve presses.

“After everything we’ve been through, after everything we’ve *seen* and *done* , don’t you just want to... *unload* until you *can’t* anymore?” Steve asks, voice cracking, desperate.

Nancy blinks again, and then her whole face crumbles, and she’s reaching for Steve as Steve realizes he’s shaking. She takes his hands in hers, shuffling close, and rocks up onto her toes to press a kiss to his cheek.

The breath rushes right out of him. The tight line of his shoulders eases. The back of his neck burns a bit, pink highlighting the high peaks of his cheeks and the tips of his ears.

"I can't say I understand because I don't," Nancy says, still holding his hands, and Steve's palms are sweating over the paper cover of *Jane Eyre* . "But I understand that it's something you need, maybe, and... as long as *you're okay* , then I don't care."

"I am," Steve says, whispers, eyes down on where her fingers are curved so delicately over his, and he remembers a time when that would've lit him on fire; now, it's just a steady comfort. "Well, not-- I'm working on *being* okay. I think."

"I still think you should talk to someone," Nancy says, ducking her head a bit to catch his eyes, and Steve swallows thick at the thought of having to put these things to words again when he always ends up falling apart after. "Hopper, maybe? I think-- I think he could really help, Steve."

"I will," Steve promises. "Tonight. I will."

"Okay," Nancy nods. "Okay, good. Then... have fun? I guess. On Saturday?"

Steve snorts. "You could come?"

"Hang out with you and Billy Hargrove while you destroy old cars at the junkyard?" Nancy balks. "I don't know what kind of girl you think I am, Steve Harrington, but I'm not *that* kind."

"No?" Steve tries for a cocky grin and half fails, but Nancy's eyes light up anyways. "You sure? Two sweaty guys, just going at it--?"

"You are an *idiot* , Steve Harrington." Nancy says, letting go of his hands, and Steve doesn't feel gutted the way he might've only a few weeks before, smiling as she nudges into his side. "And we have to get to class."

Dinner at the Byers' is a large, ridiculous affair every time they manage to make it happen. Dustin's mom always sends him with way too many cookies, and the boys always get crumbs all over the interior on the way over, no matter how many times Steve tries to scold them for it. In the passenger seat, Nancy can't hide her smile

behind her hand; it's too big and too bright, and Steve rolls his eyes hard when she turns up the radio for them when Lucas and Dustin demand they blare whatever new hit of Michael Jackson's is on. At least she and Mike are kind enough to hold the dishes Steve made; Mike is the only other one allowed to touch the dish-- homemade biscuits, this time-- because he's the only kid with steady hands.

Last time, it had taken Steve a week to get the sweet potato mess out of the seats thanks to Lucas' clumsy grip.

The first time they'd done this, back at the end of November, Steve had been appalled that Joyce had cooked every dish and no one else but Hopper had brought anything along. His parents had always insisted that it was good manners to bring something when arriving as a guest at another person's house. After that, he'd made it a mission to provide at least two additional dishes along with whatever Ms. Byers whipped up to help feed the dozen hungry idiots that piled into the Byers' home once every couple of months.

By the time they pull up, Max is already there with Will, sitting out on the front porch and flipping through a sketchpad with him, head back and laughing. Billy's Camaro is nowhere to be seen, nor is Neil Hargrove's pick-up.

Inside, Joyce is trying to usher Hopper out of the kitchen; he's got a fork with him and it's not a surprising sight to see him trying to sneak a bite or two before dinner is even ready yet. She's flustered, but in a good way, and beams when she sees Steve carrying in the bowl of green beans he'd taken off of Nancy's hands with Mike in tow.

"Oh, good, something green." She huffs, directing Steve toward the mishmash of tables-- one slightly shorter than the other, unfoldable and dragged out of the shed in the back for these kinds of occasions.

"Don't say that, yet." Steve shakes his head, setting it down where she directs him. "They're smothered in butter and brown sugar."

"It's the thought that counts." Joyce says. "Growing kids and all."

He helps her finish up the mashed potatoes while she flits, between

checking on the chicken she's breaded and is frying up, and the frozen fishsticks-- *it's all Jane will eat this month* , Hopper had grimaced -- that are baking in the oven. By the time everything is ready, the kids are settled but hungry, Dustin's complaints the loudest among the six of them.

Steve is always a little thrown when they don't say grace before eating. He isn't religious, but his mother is Catholic in her own way, and big family gatherings usually require it. But there are no bowed heads at the Byers' table, only laughter and the clatter of silverware against mismatched plates, and Steve settles into it in a way he never settles in anywhere else.

This, here, making faces at Dustin from across the table and laughing when Will accidently flings potato into Max's hair, is the one place Steve has felt at home. Surrounded by warmth. No uneasy feeling that the other shoe is about to drop. No fear or anger or dread weighing him down.

It's nights like these that he never wants to end. That he wishes would extend on, into infinity, and erase all the bad from the past and the worry from the future.

When they're all finished, full to bursting, Jonathan and Nancy volunteer for dish duty while Hopper and Joyce step out back with one another for a beer and a smoke that neither of them are supposed to be having. Steve gets dragged-- literally-- into the living room by Dustin, to sit and plan their next campaign.

He zones out halfway through Lucas and Mike arguing over classic versus new age boards, and sinks into the warmth of the room. Dustin is adding his own commentary, here and there between them, and off to the side, huddled on the couch, El sits between Max and Will.

When Steve had first met her, he'd thought, horrified, *oh, god no, not another one* . There were too many pint-sized people in his life already, too many round faces and small hands to worry after, when he wasn't busy worrying about everything else. Then, she'd introduced herself, no longer covered in blood or ash or make-up, and she'd been so firm and yet so timid, that Steve realized she

would never give him migraines the way Dustin sometimes did. She was so strong, so out of this world, and Steve knew that he would never have to jump in the line of fire for her; she wouldn't ever let him or anyone else.

They didn't get to see her often, the pressure still hanging over Hopper's head, but when they did, Steve found he liked the quiet *surety* about her. The shy smiles, the simple words, the unbridled affection she held for her friends, for her *family* . Steve was astounded that he somehow fell under that label, even if she was as tentative about him as she often was about Max or Nancy or Jonathan. People she was unfamiliar with but not unwilling to get to know.

Watching her now, sandwiched between Will and Max, Steve sees the hesitant way she points to one of the scars on Max's elbow, sees the owlish way she blinks when Max lights up and tells her *I ate it on my skateboard when I was eight, I'll show it to you when the snow finally melts* , and sees the way she lets herself laugh as Will starts to giggle, behind small hands and with quiet abandon. Steve sees that, and thinks about the things he's always trying not to think about, and his fingers pick aimlessly at the tear in his jeans at the knee-- something starting to buzz just under his skin, starting to turn over, restless and scared and maybe a bit angry on Eleven's behalf.

He's young, but he knows the difference between *right* and *fucked up* , and knowing what little he did about El's past, thinking about it in context with the little girl laughing with her friends on the couch, makes Steve *burn* .

"I'll be right back," he tells Dustin, pushing off of the carpet and waving off Dustin's curious look with a half-smile and an aborted gesture, making his way out the front door and onto the patio overlooking the front yard and the gravel path that leads up to the house.

He takes one deep breath, then another, and it's blissfully cold and blissfully clear out tonight. He plops down onto the stairs, and his body aches for the weight of a bat or a crowbar or a sledgehammer in his hands, for the release of whatever it is that keeps building up in his chest and making it hard to breathe, for the junkyard and for *Billy*

, goading him on and coaxing him into unleashing everything that keeps twisting him up inside.

Burying his face in his hands, Steve shudders. He hears the door behind him groan open, but doesn't look.

"You okay, kid?"

Steve laughs, bitter and short, glancing over at Hopper as he settles next to him on the steps. "Did Nancy send you out here?"

"Actually, Jane did." Hopper exhales a plume of smoke, elbows on his knees, squinting up at the stars. "Was Nancy supposed to send me out here?"

"No," Steve says, eyes going a bit wide. "Shit, is El good? *Shit*, I didn't mean--"

"You're fine, kid." Hopper grins, turning his narrowed eyes to Steve's face, and then offering up the cigarette. "You're eighteen, right?"

Steve takes it, and he's honestly not surprised to find his fingers trembling a little. "Yeah. Yeah, thanks."

He takes a drag and coughs. Hopper gets a bit of a kick out of that, eyes bright with something like familiarity, and Steve hisses out smoke with another cough.

"Jesus, do you roll those yourself?" Steve asks, still coughing into the crook of his arm, and Hopper hums around a pull of his own that is neither a confirmation or a declination.

They sit there for a while, passing the cigarette back and forth until it's gone. The house is a muffled sound behind them, and Steve lets the noise warm his back, even as the night starts to nip at his fingers and his face and his collar where his polo is unbuttoned beneath his bomber jacket.

"Don't let it worry you," Hopper eventually says, stubbing out the end of his cigarette. "She does that, sometimes. Tunes in when she knows she's not supposed to. Keeps tabs."

“Even on you?”

“Especially on me.” Hopper chuckles. “And she gets better at it every day. She radioed the truck last week when I bought a box of donuts I wasn’t supposed to be eating.”

Steve snorts.

“She said you wanted to talk to me,” Hopper says. “That your *thoughts are troubled* . That true?”

“I--” Steve swallows, then nods, waffling a bit. “I mean, yeah. I guess.”

“Still lost?” Hopper asks, earnest and gentle, and Steve feels something clench tight in his chest; it must show on his face because Hopper’s features soften. “You aren’t the only one struggling with all this, kid. Doesn’t mean it doesn’t suck.”

“I shouldn’t-- I haven’t even been through *half* the shit that some of you have--”

“You don’t compare suffering,” Hopper shakes his head, leaning in, and Steve wants to shrink in on himself. “What you went through, what I went through, what they went through... all of it is shit. And, sure, some of ‘em waded through a bit more for a bit longer, but it’s still shit, Steve. And you still went through it. Don’t deny yourself that.”

Steve’s breath catches, and his eyes are burning, but he squeezes them shut against the cold and against the look on Hopper’s face and nods, once, shortly. A big hand claps onto his shoulder, rubs a slow circle against his back, and Steve buries his face in his hands again.

He doesn’t cry. But it’s a close thing.

“You don’t need to talk about it, now. But when you’re ready, you gotta a whole lotta ears willing to listen.”

“Thanks, Hop.” Steve croaks. “Think I can have another cigarette, now?”

With a laugh, Hopper pulls one out of a ratty pack from his jacket pocket, lights it up, and passes it over. “Just don’t choke on it this time. You’re as bad as Joyce.”

The night has dwindled down, and Steve is only lingering at the Byers’ house because Billy still hasn’t shown up to pick up Max. He’s out on the porch again, with Dustin and Max this time, sipping from a mug of hot cocoa Joyce had given him and munching on a cookie that Dustin had shoved into his face when he’d come out to plop down next to him.

They hear Billy before they actually see him.

The engine purrs even as he pulls into park, and Max is on her feet and darting inside to say her goodbyes as music comes pouring out from the window as Billy rolls it down, a plume of smoke following like an encore to the heavy wail of guitar. Billy meets his eyes in the dim lights, and Steve is caught by them, for a moment, by the unwavering heat in them, and he holds out his mug for Dustin without looking away.

“Steve,” Dustin hisses, but Steve is already on his feet, jogging down the stairs and making his way over to the driver’s side door, hands tucked carefully into the pockets of his jacket.

Billy watches him walk up, dragging slow on his cigarette, teeth bright and sharp as he grins when Steve leans a hand onto the roof of the Camaro. “Hey, there, amigo.”

Steve bites the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling right back; Billy’s eyeing him, gaze dragging the same slow way his mouth does on the unlit end of his cigarette, down slow and back up slower. “You’re late, *amigo* .”

“Got caught up,” he says, still grinning like a shark up at Steve, eyes bright and face flush, and if Steve didn’t know any better, he’d think it was because of some party he’d rolled out of or some chick he’d rolled *off* of-- but Steve knows that look, has seen it half a dozen times after they’ve finished up at the junkyard. “Were you worried,

Harrington?”

“About your dumb ass? Not even a little.” Steve says, grin half-cocked, free hand on his hip. “How do you feel about Jack Daniels?”

“He’s one’ve my favorite guys,” Billy’s smile spreads a little wider, leaning on his elbow out the window, and Steve can feel the heat of his breath through the cotton of his polo where it’s stretched over his abdomen. “Jack, Jim, Johnny Black, and Jose. All my favorite men.”

Something coils tight, low in Steve’s stomach, and the tips of his ears burn at the implication. His fingers flex over the cool metal of the Camaro’s rooftop.

“You bringing him along, Saturday?” Billy peers up at him, eyes narrowing, almost like a challenge.

“Thinking about it,” Steve shrugs a shoulder, glancing up over the top of the car and toward the distance like he might find what he wants to say there; he doesn’t. “Wanted to make sure it was up to your *incredibly* high class standards.”

Billy’s head lolls back as he laughs, soft and breathy, eyes still on Steve’s face. “You’ve got some bite tonight, Harrington. If I hadn’t already spent my load, I might be tempted to take you up on that drink right now instead.”

“You saying you can only go once?” Steve says, before he can stop himself, and Billy’s cheek dimples in delight at the barb. “That’s a shame.”

Billy looks like he might have something to say about that, but then the front door is clattering open, Max hollering over her shoulder behind her at the house full of people, and Billy grimaces. “Sorry, pretty boy. I’ll have to get you all worked up and sweaty some other night. Duty calls.”

Steve barks out a laugh, shaking his head and taking a step back. “Yeah, sure. Maybe I’ll just go have some fun on my own-- you certainly did.”

“Don’t even think about it, Harrington.” Billy points a finger at him,

the leather of his fingerless gloves slightly worn where he'd been gripping the end of something heavy for most of the night. "You've got something wild in you tonight; like hell I'm gonna miss it. Save it for Saturday."

Max frowns as she pads around to the passenger side, glancing between Steve and Billy like they're a puzzle for her to figure out. "What's going on Saturday?"

"None of your business," Billy scoffs, revving the engine as she climbs in, gaze finally dragging away from Steve and darting over to the house. "Christ, this place still gives me the heebie jeebies."

Steve scoffs out a laugh that earns him a glare, and Billy revs the engine again, tongue sticking out from between his teeth. Max is still scowling at them.

"Saturday, Harrington." Billy says, then glances beyond him to where Dustin is gawking openly, and he winks and points his fingers like a gun at him. "Later, *geek*."

He peels out, his scolding to Max to *put on your fucking seatbelt, fuck, I'm not getting blamed for you breaking your fucking neck* carrying back on the wind as his tires kick up gravel. Steve stands there, watching, his hands on his hips and his chest a little looser.

There's something at the back of his mouth, sweet and a bit savory; anticipation. His palms itch for the bat or for something else.

Then, he turns on his heel, and Dustin is staring at him with wide, horrified eyes.

"*What the fuck*, Steve?"

"Language," he chides, half-hearted, and scuffs his sneaker before making his way back over to plop back down next to him, snatching up his mug before Dustin can think about keeping it hostage for answers.

"You know, I wasn't gonna say anything. I was gonna keep my mouth *shut* --"

“Oh, yeah? That’s new.”

“-- but you’re leaving me no choice, Steven!”

Steve’s nose wrinkles up. “Dude, don’t call me that.”

“No choice!” Dustin repeats, voice raising. “ *What* was *that* ? First, he comes in on DnD night and sweeps you away, hanging all over you like you’re old friends, and now you’re-- you’re planning an *outing* with him? You remember he beat your face in, right? And threatened Lucas? And is, in general, a giant dickhead?”

“Man, seriously, your mom is gonna kill me if you keep talking like that--”

“This is *important* , Steve!” Dustin groans, flopping back onto the wood of the porch with a grunt, and Steve winces around a laugh, peering back over at him as Dustin scrubs his hands over his face. “And he keeps calling me a *geek* !”

“Easy, tiger.” Steve pats his knee. “I’m not being swayed to the Dark Side or whatever.”

“Then what *are* you doing?” Dustin asks, propped up on his elbows, hat akimbo. “Cuz we’re worried-- Lucas and Mike and me are all worried, we saw what he did to you last time, he was a *lunatic* -- and when I’m worried, I get stressed, and when I’m stressed, I grind my teeth, Steve, and I can’t handle another orthodontic related scolding!”

With a sigh, Steve schools his face, twisting around to face him properly. “You really wanna know?”

“ Yes !”

“Okay, but you can’t tell anyone,” Steve warns, eyes narrowed, and Dustin is sat at attention, leaning in close, eager and practically bouncing. “This is some serious shit, Dustin, you gotta swear on it.”

“Spit shake?”

“Gross, no.” Steve shakes his head. “Just... your word.”

“You’ve got it.”

“Okay,” Steve drags the word out, biting the inside of his cheek, and he levels Dustin with the most serious look he can muster. “Billy and I go out every three nights and perform satanic rituals under the light of the moon, and we sacrifice virgins to the Mighty Cthu--”

“*Steve !*” Dustin socks him in the shoulder, hard enough to bruise, and Steve laughs as he cringes back. “That’s not funny!”

“Sorry, sorry,” Steve chuckles, rubbing at the sore spot on his arm, rocking back to bump into Dustin with a playful nudge, even as Dustin crosses his arms over his chest in a pout. “C’mon, hey, I’m sorry. Just messing around.”

Dustin huffs, not meeting Steve’s eyes, and he curls in on himself a bit as Steve cants his head over. He nudges at him again, and Dustin’s lips purse.

“Hey, c’mon, kid. There’s nothing crazy going on, I promise. If it really bothers you guys, I’ll stop.”

“It’s just--” Dustin breathes out sharply. “It’s just that you *just* joined the Party. You haven’t been around long and now all of a sudden you’re hanging out with Billy Hargrove. The next thing you know, you’ll be ditching us for parties and wearing stupid leather jackets and-- y’know, not hanging out with us. With me.”

Steve’s features soften, easing into something like understanding as he places a hand on Dustin’s shoulder to pull him close and squeeze.

“I’m not gonna ditch you guys, Dustin. Okay? We’ve been through too much. You’re my buds. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Except on Saturday with Billy Hargrove,” Dustin grumbles.

“I can’t hang with you all the time, Dustin. We’d drive each other crazy.” Steve smiles, scrubbing a hand through Dustin’s curls, knocking his hat off with a laugh as Dustin swats at him. “Would it make you feel better if I told you what we’re doing?”

“Maybe,” Dustin says. “Yes. Probably. I dunno.”

Steve sucks in a slow breath, pulling away to rest his elbows forward on his knees. He cradles the mug of cocoa-- lukewarm, now-- between his hands, rolling it against his palms, his mouth working.

He isn't sure how to say it in a way that would make sense for Dustin. Isn't sure how to say it at all. Even when he'd told Nancy earlier, it was a jumbled mess, and she'd only acquiesced out of sympathy to whatever pain she'd seen on Steve's face.

"I'm messed up, Dustin." Steve eventually says. "We all kind of are, but I'm... I'm struggling to figure out how to-- to *be* again. Because there's a part of me that wants to forget it all, go back to the parties and the girls and all of that dumb stuff, and then there's the part of me that's just trying to find my own feet in the dark. You know?"

"No, not really." Dustin admits, and Steve huffs out a laugh. "I don't think you're messed up."

"Well," Steve swallows. "I am. I get mad. Or I get locked up in my own head. Or I freak out over nothing. And I don't like it. Hanging out with Billy... it helps."

"Because he's messed up, too?"

"Kinda," Steve nods. "We don't do much. Just... chill out, tell each other to fuck off a lot, break some shit at the junkyard."

"And it helps?"

"A little," Steve meets Dustin's curious gaze, grinning at his pursed mouth, at his narrowed eyes, seeing the first marks of Dustin figuring something out. "Hanging out with you guys helps, too. There's a lot of little stuff, and it's complicated, but I'm figuring it out."

"And do you think it's helping Billy, too?" Dustin asks. "Because he's *really* messed up. Like, *way more* messed up than you."

"Maybe," Steve shrugs. "I hope so."

"That makes sense," Dustin nods, sagely and way too old for his young thirteen years. "That you want to help him not be messed up, I mean."

“Does it?”

“Yeah, Steve.” Dustin sighs, shaking his head. “You’re way too nice.”

Steve chokes out a laugh. “Thanks, I think.”

They sit there for a minute, in the quiet. Steve is surprised Ms. Byers hasn’t come out to round them up, yet.

It’s getting cold.

“I guess... if it’s not getting your ass kicked,” Dustin eventually says. “And it might make Billy a little less of a dickhole, then... Then I guess it’s cool. If you wanna hang out with him sometimes.”

“Yeah?” Steve’s brows fly up. “Think the rest of the Party will see it that way?”

“I’ll make sure they get it,” Dustin assures. “I’ll make some charts or something.”

“God, you’re such a nerd.” Steve hooks his arm around Dustin’s neck, tugging him in and scrubbing at his hair again until Dustin squeaks out an outraged sound. “Thanks, man.”

“Anytime,” Dustin bobs his head, trying to tame the wild mess of his curls. “But if you pierce your ear and start wearing too much leather, I’m radioing El to exorcise the evil out of you.”

Steve shrugs with his mouth. “I kind of like the leather.”

“ *Steve !*”

9. And I would like to move in just a little bit closer

Notes for the Chapter:

WHOOPS, TWO PART CHAPTER NOW TURNING INTO THREE PART CHAPTER, MY FUCKING BAD, I JUST HAVE A LOT OF SHIT TO DO, I'M NOT EVEN ACTUALLY ALL THAT SORRY, SO... SORRY

Chapter 8 part 2 of 3

AKA: open up your loving arms (I want some; want some)

ALSO WARNING: discussions of abuse; implied and blatant mental health issues; misuse of alcohol and drugs in multiple different ways; casual disregard about characters' own issues because honestly this is how a lot of people discuss this shit

I REALLY HOPE PART 3 OF THIS FUCKING CHAPTER IS OUT SOON AND THAT I DON'T MAKE IT FUCKING 9K AGAIN.

Saturday comes with a rush of excitement, adrenaline already pumping through his veins when he wakes, and he nearly gears up for a run just to take the edge off when his mom calls him down for breakfast.

His father's nose is in the morning paper, and he barely looks up when Steve comes trotting down in a pair of ratty jeans and a dark, cotton tee, his hair a bit wild and untamed. His mother is on her third mimosa.

"Steve, lovey, do you have plans?" she smiles.

"Yeah, I'm taking the kids to the arcade and hanging out with a friend for a bit." Steve greets her with a kiss on the cheek.

"Isn't our boy a darling, Johnny?" his mother smiles, loose and a bit dopey, and Steve grimaces as she drinks more from her champagne

flute. “Did I tell you that the Henderson woman stopped me at the market to complement our Stevie?”

“You mentioned it,” Steve’s dad grunts, turning the paper over, and Steve grits his teeth.

“Well,” his mother blinks, the indifference of his father’s tone going right over her head, and Steve sighs when he sees the bottle of pills open on the kitchen counter. “Don’t let us keep you, *mio caro* . Go have fun.”

“Thanks, mama.” Steve leans in, kissing her cheek again, and he meets her eyes as he pulls away to gesture to her glass, voice low. “No more of those, okay? For me? I’ll be home after dinner.”

She blinks again, and it takes a moment for her to really focus on his face before he sees the way her fingers lock up around the stem of the flute, and she offers a stilted nod and an apologetic little smile. “Of course, *Stefano* . And bring your friends, if you like. Your father is leaving this afternoon for Indianapolis.”

“I will. Love you, mom.” Steve pulls away, slinging a bag over his shoulder. “Later, pops.”

He’s out the door in as few paces as it takes, practically running, but he knows that if he stayed, he’d end up picking a fight with his dad again. It isn’t how he wants to start today, not with the promise of destruction at the tips of his fingers.

The drive to pick up the kids is a short one. His left leg keeps bouncing as he cruises along, and if Dustin notices it when he climbs in with Lucas and Mike, he doesn’t mention it.

It’s only when he pulls up in front of the arcade and they spot Billy and Max standing outside of the Camaro, bickering quietly and heatedly, that Dustin leans over the gearbox and says:

“You sure you don’t wanna chill out with us today?”

“Go, dipshit.” Steve frowns, gesturing to the double doors with a

swing of his chin. "I'll be back around four. We'll do burgers or something."

Dustin snuffles, pressing a hand to his chest. "You're a good man, Steve Harrington."

"*Out*," Steve says, and then they're clamoring out of the Beamer and heading for the arcade, Lucas lingering back for Max.

Steve sits, watching, as the Beamer idles. Max hisses something up at Billy, and his jaw clenches as he looks away, his hands deep in the pockets of his leather jacket. Steve's only seen him do that once, that first night when Steve had said *I don't want to be like you* or something along those lines, and his fingers clench over the steering wheel.

Max's shoulders slump, she takes a tentative step forward, and Billy sucks in a breath so sharp that she freezes. Steve bites down hard on the inside of his cheek.

He thinks he sees Max say *I'm sorry*, but he's not sure what she's apologizing for or if she's apologizing at all, and Billy shakes his head. He thinks he sees Max say *we can go*, but Billy is reaching out and scrubbing a hand over the top of her head in a way that makes her cringe away and glare up at him. He's laughing as he gestures back toward the arcade, toward Lucas, and Steve can see that his smile doesn't reach his eyes, even from here, but Max is already nodding, tentatively smiling, and running off.

Steve doesn't know what to make of it. Doesn't know what he just saw.

What he *does* know is that, the moment Billy looks over and meets his eyes through the windshield, there's trouble on the horizon.

His smile is a sharp, scary thing that sends a shiver racing up Steve's spine, and then he's jingling his keys and stepping into the Camaro, revving up the engine, and peeling out. Steve scrambles to follow, heart rabbiting in his chest, but Billy drives like a madman on a normal day-- and today *is not normal*.

He loses him halfway between the arcade and the backroads that lead toward the junkyard.

When Steve finally rolls up to it, the sky blue and bright above them, Billy is already slamming the sledgehammer into the side of the old bus with abandon. He's swinging like he's half-crazed, and he just might be, and Steve is stuck, frozen, in the driver's seat of the Beamer as he watches Billy lay into the chassis-- right up until the head of the sledgehammer breaks off, goes flying, and Billy abandons it for laying his fists into the unforgiving bend of metal instead.

Steve nearly strangles himself against his own seatbelt, throwing his door open and stumbling, already calling out as he rushes over. "Hargrove, hey! Hargrove!"

But Billy doesn't hear him. Or maybe he isn't listening.

Steve can taste tin at the back of his mouth. His entire *body* is trembling. He lurches forward the second he sees red smear over yellow.

"Get-- Get offa me!" Billy shouts, guttural and *so angry*, but Steve just wraps his arms around him from behind and tries to pin Billy's arms to his sides as he drags him back away from the bus. "I'll-- Harrington, I'll fucking *kill you -- get off me !*"

"Billy, *stop .*" Steve hisses, eyes squeezing shut tight, arms squeezing tighter, and he realizes that Billy is shaking too because there's *no way* he should be able to stop Billy, not really, but the fight is already draining right out of him as he struggles in Steve's hold. "Billy, hey, stop, it's fine. *You're fine .*"

His laugh is dark and unhinged, his head knocking back just hard enough to make Steve lose his grip. "The *fuck* would you know, Harrington? *Huh ?*"

"Billy--"

Billy catches him by the shirt front, reels him around and shoves him *hard* against the side of the bus he'd just been beating in. His knuckles are bleeding.

"This isn't the answer, man." Steve shakes his head, hands out in front of himself, and he hisses as Billy shakes him. "You gotta stop, Billy, you gotta take a breath and *stop*."

"This was *your idea*, Harrington!" Billy spits, in Steve's face, their knees knocking as he pins him back. "Unleash a little rage, right? *Express a little aggression?*"

"Not like this," Steve breathes, pulse jumping in his neck, eyes wide on Billy's own, and his hands are gentle and steady at Billy's wrist-- not stopping, not pushing, not squeezing-- just holding. Like an anchor. For both of them. "Not like this, Billy. It's not-- You're *hurting yourself*."

Billy falters at that, like maybe he's just realized what a mess he's made of his own hands. He jerks back, eyes a bit wide, breath catching, and Steve watches him, hands still up, eyes still on Billy's face.

Hissing, Billy sneers and turns on a heel, stalking over to where the Camaro sits. Steve knows, with a keen kind of clarity, that if he lets Billy walk away now, he won't come back.

"Billy, hey. Wait a sec-- you don't have to *leave*." Steve shoves off the side of the bus, stumbling to a stop when Billy jerks back around, face red and eyes wild-- but something desperate and maybe embarrassed in the curve of his mouth.

"What, Harrington? What do you suggest I do instead, huh? Apparently your *shitty idea* isn't doing me any good, so what could you possibly have to say to me?"

Steve feels the words flood into his mouth before he can hope to stop them. "Talk to me."

Billy barks out a laugh, bitter and broken and brash. "That's a good one, pretty boy."

"No, I--" Steve squares his feet, jaw flexing. "I'm serious. Talk to me. What the fuck--? What happened? You were fine last night, what--?"

"None of your fucking business," Billy snarls, turning his back on him again, moving to the Camaro, jerking open the driver's side door--

"I almost died," Steve blurts, and Billy freezes, foot half-lifted into the Camaro. "Here, actually, last November."

Billy's fingers flex over the top of the driver's side door; blood smears over the glass. He lowers his boot back down, turning to squint over at Steve, and Steve's shoulders sag.

"I've almost died, like, three times now, actually. Maybe more. Twice at the Byers' house. So. Definitely more." Steve bobs his head, throat working, and he shuffles closer a step, his hands still out, like he's pleading, and Billy just stares. "And-- And that's... that's just the tip of the fucking fucked up iceberg that is my life these days, but... but it's enough to give me nightmares and make me not give two fucks about whatever bullshit popularity contest you wanted to start with me because-- because I'm fucked up, and I think you're fucked up too, and--"

Steve nearly chokes; his mouth is so dry, his heart so loud and heavy, his breath so short. Billy watches him, jaw tight, eyes never leaving Steve's face.

"And I think maybe we could help each other be a little less fucked up if we just let ourselves."

Billy's upper lip curls, disdain ugly on his face, but then he spits a curse and slams the door shut again. He stands there, hands at his sides, like he doesn't quite know what to do with them as he faces Steve.

Steve takes one deep breath. Then another. His own hands drop. He feels dizzy.

"For the love of god, Harrington, tell me you brought the booze." Billy finally says, and Steve laughs, a bit manic, and nods his head, hair bouncing wildly.

"Yeah," Steve breathes. "Yeah, I brought the booze."

They end up sitting on the thick rubber of an old tractor tire, knees bumping when Steve plops down close enough to demand that Billy show him his hands. Billy rolls his eyes, but does it without much protest otherwise, elbows on his thighs, eyeing Steve as Steve's focus narrows down to the swelling of Billy's knuckles, the split in the skin, the blood still flowing sluggishly between his fingers. His left hand mostly looks scuffed up and a little bruised; his right is a mess.

Steve pulls his bag to him, having grabbed it out of the back of the Beamer after realizing that Billy really wasn't about to bolt anymore, and Billy lights up as Steve pulls out a handle of whiskey. Steve unscrews the cap with his teeth, taking one of Billy's wrists in a vice grip, and pouring out a shots worth of Jack Daniels over Billy's bleeding knuckles.

"What the *fuck*, Harrington?" Billy jerks out of his hold, hissing and spitting like a cat, until Steve shoves the bottle against his chest and pulls Billy's hand back over. "*Christ*, warn a guy."

"Don't be such a baby," Steve mumbles, frowning down at the rivlets of pink still sliding down to drip from the heel of Billy's palm, the tips of his fingers, the jut of delicate bone at his wrist. "Can you move your fingers?"

Billy grunts around a mouthful of whiskey and waggles his fingers with a wince.

Steve's mouth twists up, and he sighs, digging around in his bag for the bandana he knows is hiding at the bottom somewhere. "I don't think you broke anything, but I'm really not an expert."

"No fucking shit," Billy huffs, and there's the faintest tremor in his fingers as Steve cradles the weight of Billy's hand in his own, and then his knee is knocking into Steve's. "Think I'll keep all my fingers, doc, or will we have to amputate?"

"I *think* that you should probably talk to an *actual* doctor," Steve says, pulling the red bandana free with a little triumphant flick of his wrist, meeting Billy's eyes briefly. "But I have a feeling that'll be harder than getting you to stop acting like a tool on a daily basis."

“Don’t lie, Harrington. You *like it* when I’m a tool.”

Billy grins, catching the tail end of a smile as Steve ducks his head back down to wrap the carefully folded bandana around Billy’s bleeding knuckles, cinching a knot tight on top. Something in Steve stops and then turns over when he feels Billy’s fingers squeeze at his own before letting go.

It’s brief but warm. Steve’s fingers are much colder, much softer, in comparison to Billy’s.

Steve isn’t sure if the touch is a *thank you* or an apology or both.

“So,” Billy takes another long pull from the whiskey bottle before passing it back to shrug out of his jacket. “You said something about almost dying?”

“I said something about talking,” Steve says, wincing around a sip, eyeing Billy as he lounges back in his too tight white cotton t-shirt to look over Steve’s first aid work, apparently unbothered by the cold still clinging to Hawkins as they head into late February.

“And about almost dying,” Billy frowns at him. “Multiple times.”

“ You just went all heavy metal rage-mode, *punching a bus* , and you want me to tell you all about how I almost died a couple of times?” Steve lifts a droll brow, knocking back another cringe-worthy swig before setting the bottle at their feet with a shudder; the heat of liquor burning him up from the inside out, his fingers and face still cold but his chest on fire. “You don’t think maybe we should be talking about *you* ?”

Billy shrugs, features pinching a bit, and his gaze strays from Steve’s face when Steve refuses to stop looking at him. “Maybe hearing you will loosen my tongue.”

With a heavy sigh, Steve’s head drops back, and he looks up at the sparse clouds floating through the blue, blue sky. “I am gonna need way more than just alcohol for this shit.”

He doesn’t wait for Billy’s reply. He’s already digging back around in his backpack, pulling out a little baggy of weed and a few slips of

smoking paper.

Billy leans forward, peers around Steve's hands, and whistles low when he spots what Steve is rolling together in his lap. His eyes are bright, much less manic now, as he watches Steve lick the blunt closed, and he pulls out his lighter before Steve can even finish it. Steve moves to take it, but Billy jerks it just out of reach, gesturing with a swing of his chin.

Eyeing him, Steve places the narrow end between his lips and leans forward. Billy flicks the lighter open, lights it, and cups his injured hand around the flame as he holds it to the twisted paper at the end of the blunt. Steve pulls once, twice, and the paper catches and smoke fills his mouth-- sweet and slightly tangy, heavy on his tongue and in the air. Billy pulls back enough to tuck his lighter away again, then rests his elbows forward on his knees, lingering in Steve's space, eyes on the blunt between his lips.

Steve finally gets a good toke, now that it's properly lit, and breathes deep. It tickles down the back of his throat, but goes smooth, filling his chest with a heavy but comfortable weight as he holds it before exhaling back out, blowing smoke into Billy's face.

Billy inhales sharply, nostrils flaring a moment, but his eyes are busy-- darting all over Steve as Steve's shoulders begin to go easy, his posture relaxing, the incessant trembling that had taken his body since coming upon Billy fading away to nonexistence. His eyes zero in on Steve's mouth again when Steve takes a smaller drag, and he wets his own lips when Steve finally holds the blunt out to him.

He takes it and takes his time pulling slow, sweet drags from it, muttering a soft *this is good shit, Harrington* after his first, but Steve is too busy sinking into the slowing of his own pulse. The tingling of his lips and his fingers. The weight of his own head on his neck. A kind calm coming to him now that Billy isn't bleeding or breaking, now that they're both subdued in the quiet chill of a February day.

"So," Billy says around a mouthful of smoke, squinting a bit as he passes the blunt back. "You wanted to talk, let's talk."

Steve doesn't take another drag; watches the end burn in the faint

breeze instead. "Here's the thing, Hargrove. Nice as it sounds, opening up and braiding each other's hair and shit, there's a small hang-up with the fact that I can't go into specifics. *I can't*."

"The fuck does that mean?" Billy tilts his head, fingers playing with the frayed ends of the bandana around his right hand.

"It means that, even if I *hadn't* signed a government document swearing on my first born child that I wouldn't open my mouth, I still wouldn't be able to tell you anything that you'd believe." Steve says, finally taking another slow pull, hissing slightly as it goes down, the end wet from Billy's mouth. "And I wouldn't *want* to. It's not shit I really like talking about."

"Then why the fuck are we talking about talking in the first place?" Billy frowns, holding up his injured hand and giving a little waggle of his fingers. "You think I wanna talk about *this* shit?"

"Want and should are two different animals," Steve says. "So, even though I *can't* and I *don't want to* , I'll try to tell you as much as I *can* ."

Billy's eyes narrow a moment, flitting over Steve's face.

"*If* ," Steve adds, holding out the blunt like it's part of whatever deal it is he's striking. "If you tell me what made you snap like that."

"Done," Billy says, without hesitation, and Steve blinks as he plucks the blunt from between his fingers to take his own pull, grinning as Steve stares at him. "You show me yours, Harrington, I'll show you mine."

Steve starts somewhere after Barb and ends somewhere after Billy beating his face in. He explains it, as loosely as he can, and in general terms, about how when the lab started having its issues the year previous, Steve got wrapped up in it because of Nancy. How he nearly died in the Byers' house, with Nancy and Jonathan, because of what the lab had done-- like Barb had; like Will almost had.

He tells him about how they'd all been made to sign *non-disclosure*

agreements after that first time, so when things began going wrong again in the fall, they didn't have much more of a choice outside of taking care of it themselves. He tells him that the lab hadn't done its job cleaning up, that they had let their mistake spread until it was almost too late, that Steve had nearly died-- *again* ; on, like, *three different occasions* that night-- trying to keep the kids out of it, even as they dragged him headfirst *into* it.

He doesn't say anything about monsters, or faces that open up to a million razor sharp teeth, or little girls with incredible powers, or tunnels beneath the town filled with shadows and decay. He doesn't say anything about them, but he sees them in his head, smells them in his nose, even as he tries to drown it in the dank scent of weed burning fresh between them.

Billy seems to realize this, notice it, because he's quiet the entire time. Bites his tongue, swallows down each question, each *bullshit, Harrington, what's the actual truth, what are you hiding?* , that he obviously wants to say, and instead reaches out and takes Steve's jaw in a hand when Steve's eyes grow too distant at the end, too glassed over, and says:

"Come on back to earth, Harrington. You're not there; you're here."

His voice is low and rough, from the pot smoke and maybe from holding his tongue so long, and Steve's eyes flutter as he focuses on the lines between Billy's eyebrows. As he focuses on the blue of Billy's eyes.

"There you are," Billy mutters, fingers fanned along the line of Steve's throat, thumb pressing just under his jaw, and Steve blinks and jerks slightly.

If his touch lingers after Steve has come back out of his own head, Billy doesn't acknowledge it. Steve *definitely* doesn't.

But his skin burns in the wake of his touch, the skin on his arms and the back of his neck rising, the tips of his ears going pink. Steve clears his throat with a cough, then holds out a hand for the decimated blunt, happy to take the last couple of hits.

Billy's holding out the bottle of whiskey when he's done, brows up, lips pressed thin. Steve takes that, too, wiping at his chin with the sleeve of his jacket when he takes too big of a mouthful. When he holds the bottle back out, Billy takes a hefty swig of his own, and then sets it back down at their feet.

"No wonder you're so attached to those dweebs," Billy finally says, eyes on something in the distance, after they've sat there for a few minutes in silence, the weight of *known* and *unknown* hanging between them; Steve is grateful that Billy doesn't ask for more, for details, because even on the cusp of drunk and definitely high, Steve is starting to feel a little bit like he needs to curl into himself or get in his car until Hawkins is miles behind him.

"Shared trauma tends to bond people," Steve croaks, hunching slightly and worrying the inside of his cheek with his teeth-- a bad habit of his when he's high and nervous.

"Hate to admit it, Harrington, but your trauma might trump mine."

Steve frowns, shaking his head, eyes on the garrish red of the bandana wrapped around Billy's hand, Hopper's words from last night rattling between his ears. "Shit is shit. Just because it's different, that doesn't mean it's less shitty. It's still shit, and you still went through it."

"Poignant," Billy huffs, turning his head to meet Steve's eyes. "I get why a little high school drama wouldn't be in your wheelhouse anymore. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a bit disappointed I won't get to see King Steve back on the throne for a while, though."

"I don't know why you're so stuck on that. Figuring out who *King Steve* was-- who *I* was before... well, before."

"You're an interesting guy, Harrington, I can't help but *be* a little interested." Billy's grin is slow, broadening bigger when Steve's nose wrinkles up. "The rumors don't help. *King Steve* getting all the girls.

King Steve ruling the school. King Steve, King Steve, *King fucking Steve*."

"*King Steve* was an asshole," Steve snorts. "He was stupid and

ignorant and a dick. I like to think I'm a bit better than all that."

"Newsflash, Harrington. You're still an asshole."

"Shut the fuck up," Steve tries, and fails, to hide his grin.

Billy smiles, stretching back with a satisfied groan, and Steve's stomach twists as Billy's eyes burn over his face-- and then he's leaning in, voice dipping, head canted over to keep his gaze locked with Steve's. "You know what I think, though? I don't think he's actually gone. I think you're just scared that if you let loose a little, something'll go wrong."

Steve's jaw clicks so tight that it aches.

"Am I wrong?" Billy asks, and then swings a hand out to gesture at the junkyard in the bright afternoon light. "Or has all of this been a show?"

"You're not wrong."

Billy's grin falters.

"I'm scared shitless most of the time, I've got no idea what might happen next, and sometimes it gets so bad that I can't turn the lights off in my room to sleep at night," Steve says, and Billy is staring at him like he had all those weeks ago at Dan's party, like Steve's a puzzle he wants to solve. "And that's just part of it, you know? There are parts of me that are angry, *all the time*, and parts that are lost, and parts that just want to party and forget everything, and parts that are *terrified* -- and I think you get that. I think you're like that, too."

Billy shifts next to him, face closing off, jaw flexing. "What would you know about it?"

"I know that you're actually a lot more fun to be around when you aren't on the edge of full blown rage," Steve says, tone softening some, eyes on the side of Billy's face as Billy looks away. "I know that when you snap, you snap *hard*, and fuck everything in your path. I know that you're actually pretty fucking funny when you aren't being crude as fuck. And I know that you're mad at

something, and you're scared of something else, and they might be the same thing, but it's nearly impossible to get a clear read on you when you're always putting up that *bad boy next door* front."

With a short laugh, Billy shakes his head, letting it hang between his shoulders. Steve presses his lips together in a thin line, palms itching to reach out and touch and maybe comfort, but he doesn't.

"I think I know a couple of other things, but they're less solid." Steve says. "But I know last night you were ready to come out here with me, have some fun, blow off some steam-- and today you were on the edge of the deep end."

When Billy looks at him, his eyes are burning. Blazing. Daring Steve to continue, to ask what it is he's going to ask, and Steve sighs.

"So," he wets his lips, knee bouncing a bit. "What happened? What changed?"

And Steve thinks he knows what Billy's going to say, but he needs him to say it.

And eventually, Billy does.

"My dad's an abusive dickwad, Harrington." Billy says, and he's smiling while he says it, and it sends a chill down Steve's spine. "I think you probably put two and two together already, but that's what happened. He roughed me up a little last night, said his usual shit, and I came out here wanting to burn the whole goddamn world."

Steve's throat works; his mouth is too dry. "How often--?"

"Used to be a lot worse, when I was younger and didn't know how to toe his lines." Billy shrugs, like it's nothing, and Steve's chest burns hot and overwhelming at the idea. "These days, months can go by. Still happens, though. Last night I was a little too disrespectful. He's big on that shit."

Steve doesn't really know what to say-- doesn't know if he should comfort Billy, if Billy wants him to, if Steve's even *allowed* -- but he knocks his knee into Billy's anyway and offers a meek smile when Billy's eyes shoot up to his. "Your dad's an asshole."

Billy's head tips back when he laughs, hand over his stomach, cheek dimpling. "Yeah. Yeah, he really fucking is. Fucker bruised my side and broke my favorite goddamn record."

"Definitely grade A asshole material right there," Steve nods, and his brows draw heavy over his eyes. "He doesn't hit Max, does he--?"

"Nah, he doesn't lay a hand on women." Billy shakes his head. "They're *too soft* , even when they're fucking wildcats like Maxine."

Steve hums, nodding. "Have you ever-- I mean, have you ever told anyone?"

"Couple of, ahh... *friends* back in California knew. Older crowd, mostly. Let me couch surf when I needed, but couldn't do much else." Billy tells him. "It is what it is, these days, and I'm just biding my time until I can leave."

"You could turn him in," Steve suggests, almost a whisper, because Billy's eyes harden and his mouth turns down and Steve sucks in a sharp breath.

"Harrington, I swear to *fuck* , if you tell *anyone* --"

"I won't," Steve says. "But you should. And I can't make any promises if he ever goes after Max--"

"He won't."

"If he *does* ," Steve's voice goes steely, unyielding, the echoes of two fingers pushing against Billy's chest in the Byers' kitchen and a furious *get out* ringing below the surface. "They won't find the body."

Billy balks, eyes widening, and they skirt over the severe look on Steve's face with a furtive cadence. " *Jesus* , Harrington."

"And the next time he lays a hand on you, come to my place. I've got plenty of fucking room, even with my parents home."

Billy blinks rapidly, eyes going a bit glassy, and Steve drops his eyes, unable to stomach the genuine shock he sees there on Billy's face, even as Billy covers it up with a smarmy grin and a nudging elbow.

“Didn’t think you cared, princess. Color me surprised.”

“You’re an asshole, Billy.” Steve says. “Doesn’t mean you deserve that shit.”

Steve catches the way Billy’s throat works out of the corner of his eyes and doesn’t comment on it. Doesn’t draw attention to it.

Doesn’t do anything but nod and smile when Billy eventually croaks out a soft *thanks* .

“You hungry?” Steve asks, much later, when he’s sobered up enough to drive the kids, head no longer a wash of drink and smoke and memories, and Billy looks up at him where he’s attempting to carve his initials into the hubcap of some old beater. “I’m taking the shitheads to the drive-in burger joint off Elm before I head home.”

Cigarette dangling from his lips, Billy shrugs and snaps his pocket knife shut. “Max would probably badger me to go anyways.”

He says it likes it’s a hassle, but they’ve been sitting and talking aimlessly for hours now, and Steve thinks he knows better. Billy resents his sister-- though he won’t go into details as to why-- but he seems to have developed a soft spot for her since the whole *bat and balls* incident. Like her outburst had shaken something loose in Billy, or straightened something out. When Billy had talked about that night, about Max that night, explaining why he’d ended up going full-throttle into Steve and the kids now that Steve knew about his father, it had been with a tone of fond annoyance, and perhaps a bit of regret, and Steve hadn’t pushed for more details even though he’d itched for them. Still itches for them.

In return, Steve told him about the first time he and Nancy broke up. About spray painting the Marquee’s sign in garrish red-- *shit, Harrington, you really were my kind of dick, weren’t you?*-- and how angry he’d been. He told him about wanting to hurt them as much as he’d been hurt, how he’d prodded and pushed at Jonathan until the other boy snapped, and how Jonathan had split his face open, fucked up his eye, and given him road rash. How, now, he was happy it

turned out that way. How much he felt like he deserved much worse.

“That’s fucked up,” Billy’d said.

“I thought we’d already established that we’re both pretty fucked up, Hargrove.”

“Just didn’t think a golden boy like you would hate yourself so much,” and Steve had burned at that, had to force himself not to shrink in on himself, away from Billy’s knowing blue eyes. “Guess we got that in common.”

Steve had wanted to ask what he meant by that, what Billy hated himself for, but he knew if he did, the question would get thrown right back into his own face. And Steve wasn’t sure-- *isn’t* sure-- he’d be able to answer it.

And now, Steve isn’t sure if it’s having been vulnerable that makes him brave, that makes him comfortable-- or if it’s having seen Billy vulnerable too.

“Let’s take off, then.” Steve stands, stretching up onto his toes with a groan, the cool of the afternoon having set into their still bodies without the usual heat of exertion to keep them warm, and Billy watches him from his spot on the ground. “And afterwards, you can come hang out at mine. If you want, anyway.”

“And why would I do a thing like that?” Billy asks, but he’s smiling-- something dangerous in it.

Steve shrugs, tucking his hands into his pockets, and wets his lips as Billy shoves to his feet to amble into Steve’s space. “Beats going home to your dad, right?”

Billy cocks a brow, drawing a slow drag before dropping his cigarette to the ground and stomping it out wordlessly.

“And besides,” Steve says, wavering a bit, but he swallows down his own trepidation and meets Billy’s stare. “We’re friends, now, remember? You drove my drunk ass home, I called you a bunch of names, you stalked me for a while... pretty sure this heart-to-heart cemented the deal.”

“Friends, huh?” And when Billy glances down, it’s almost bashful.

Steve grins. “Yeah, you know, two people who aren’t total assholes to each other but still wanna punch each other in the face sometimes. Friends.”

“You’ve got a funny definition of the word,” Billy snorts, but his cheek dimples, and he bobs his head. “Sure, Harrington. Sounds like a fuckin’ party.”

The narrow eyed look on Mike Wheeler’s face is so reminiscent of Nancy’s that Steve wants to laugh. He nearly snorts up his own milkshake when he first sees it, but Dustin just thinks that he has brainfreeze and pats him on the back.

“I told you it was too cold for ice cream, man.”

Steve doesn’t correct him, but he does duck his head when Mike’s eyes narrow further. Only Will seems to have noticed, and he’s struggling to hide his own mirth from his spot on Mike’s left, glancing between him and where Steve is crammed between Billy and Dustin on the opposite side of the booth, Lucas and Max having pulled up chairs to the head of the small table at the back of the fast food joint.

The kids had outright refused to simply sit at the drive-in, insisting on going inside where they’d have more space. It wasn’t any fun when it was too cold for the waitress to rollerskate up to the windows anyway.

They hadn’t been expecting Max to show up too. Especially not with Billy in tow.

Stealing a fry from Steve’s basket, Billy rests his elbow on the table and eyes him. “You alright, Harrington?”

“It’s nothing,” Steve waves a hand, and Billy’s eyes narrow too, but it’s almost playful.

Billy leans in. “Are you *lying* to me, Harrington--?”

“What is he doing here?” Mike finally asks, and Billy’s already directing a lazy grin his way as Steve hides his smile behind a rather large bite of his hamburger, watching as Mike turns that baleful glare on Billy. “What are you doing here?”

“Max said she wanted to get dinner with her stupid friends,” Billy says. “So I brought her to dinner with her stupid friends.”

Mike’s mouth turns down into something very near a pout and *Jesus* , it’s a miracle Steve hasn’t busted a gut. He’d expected a bit of a mutiny, but he hadn’t expected Mike Wheeler’s *I’m disappointed in you* face to mirror Nancy’s so thoroughly.

And, Steve thinks, there might be a little bit of a residual high clinging to him.

“And you couldn’t’ve eaten outside?” Mike frowns.

Billy twists to look at Steve. “Is this kid serious?”

“Billy,” Max sighs, but even Lucas is starting to look more amused than he is unsettled.

Will is still watching with wide, eager eyes.

Steve is choking on mirth, eyes bright as he shrugs Billy’s way. “Probably. It’s hard to tell with Mike, sometimes.”

Beneath the table, Dustin kicks at Mike and misses.

“Whoops. Sorry, Will.” He kicks again, even as Will rubs at his shin with a little hiss, and nails Mike in the knee. “Dude, we talked about this last night.”

“ Hey !” Mike looks just on the edge of throwing his burger at Dustin’s face. “That doesn’t--”

“Mike,” Dustin warns, drawing out his name, and Mike’s brows furrow *hard* .

“It was different when it was just--”

“ *Mike .*”

“I’m just saying, it’s *weird--* !”

Will nudges into Mike’s shoulder with his own. “C’mon, Mike. It’s not that different from you and me, right? Crazy, together.”

It takes the fight right out of him. His shoulders slump as he looks down over at Will, and he casts one last glum look Billy and Steve’s way before heaving out a sigh so heavy and so loud it’s a miracle he has any oxygen left in him when he’s done.

Steve thinks this must be what it’s like to have children. Frustrating, endlessly hilarious, children. A giant headache on most days, but a funny one.

“Fine,” Mike finally says, sinking down into the booth and picking at his fries. “But if he tries anything, I say we give Max the bat again.”

When Billy casts a sharp look Max’s way, she practically preens. He opens his mouth, chest puffing up a bit, and Steve doesn’t know what he’s about to say-- but he doesn’t get to say it.

“Why do that when we could just sic El on him?” Dustin asks.

“ *Dustin* !” Mike and Lucas hiss, and Billy’s face is already twisting into something confused and curious and bright eyed-- the same look he always gets when he smells a secret. “Shut up!” Mike adds.

“I’m just saying--”

“Man, oh my *god .*” Lucas is shaking his head, and there’s a mad scramble beneath the table as Steve narrowly avoids Mike’s feet as he tries to get at Dustin beneath it.

Will tucks his legs up, knees under his chin, and he’s laughing so hard there are tears in his eyes as the other kids yell at Dustin’s floundering. He’s got his hands up in surrender, trying to cram himself as far as he can into the corner of the booth away from Mike, and Steve is laughing too.

He doesn’t stop until he feels a hand on his knee, large and warm and

squeezing . He freezes, breath catching and face flush from his laughter, and something electric thrums up his back, between his shoulder blades, to his nape, and then explodes in tiny sparks all along the back of his scalp. His thigh is completely flush with Billy's beneath the table, and Billy's breath his hot against the side of his face, the shell of his ear.

The kids don't notice. They're too busy yelling at each other.

"You've got some weird fucking friends, Harrington." Billy says.

Steve takes a deep breath and turns to face him, smile crooked and heart unsteady, but the eyebrow he raises is dry. Pointed.

He doesn't have to say a word.

Billy rolls his eyes and flings a stolen fry at him. "Shut the fuck up."

He swears he thinks he sees Billy Hargrove blushing.

"Didn't say a thing," Steve says.

Billy gives him a dirty look and stabs a fry into the puddle of ketchup in a paper bowl between them all. His hand slides away from Steve's knee, and Steve feels like something rattles loose in his chest. Like he can breathe normally again.

He hadn't realized it had been so hard.

Leaning forward, elbows on the table, Billy turns away from Steve and offers a shark smile to the table around them. "So," he drolls. "Who's El?"

" *Dustin* !"

After dropping the kids off, Steve waits for Billy outside of his own house, sitting with the heater on in his car. He's drumming his hands against the wheel, bopping to *Roxanne* , when Billy's Camaro rumbles up next to him in the driveway.

"You're such a fucking prep," Billy groans when he steps out, catching the last notes of the song on Steve's radio as Steve kicks his own door open, grin lopsided and hair a mess from tossing his head around; Billy may be sneering, but his eyes are fire bright, even in the growing dusk. "It's honestly a little disgusting."

"Don't fucking lie," Steve kills the engine, sliding out of his seat. "Everyone loves The Police."

"I don't."

Steve scoffs, but he's already leading Billy toward the two front doors of his house. "You have any trouble dropping Max off?"

"Nah, my old man is used to me taking off. Just thinks I'm out partying and wasting my life." Billy's shoulders roll, like just talking about it is making him tense, and Steve realizes it probably is.

So Steve tosses a "take your damn shoes off" over his shoulder when they step inside, instead of anything else.

It's worth it when Billy's lips curl into a pleased little grin, like Steve's insistence on house manners are somehow more funny, more preppy, than Steve dancing in the front seat of his own car to The Police. He crouches down and unlaces his boots, though, and toes them off without a fuss.

He hovers in the door after shrugging out of his coat. Like he might bolt back out into the cold in nothing but a cotton shirt and his socks.

Steve waves a hand and coaxes him further into the house, beyond the foyer and past the stairs, into the kitchen, where Steve calls out for his mother.

"Mama, you here?"

He rounds the corner, Billy trailing just behind him, to find his mother camped out in front of the roaring fireplace, a hot toddy by her hip, her toenails in four different shades of red. She beams when she spots them, an errant curl straying from the delicate twist piled on top of her head, draped in silk and smelling heavily of perfume and brandy.

She's in an upswing. Steve can tell by the way everything has been rearranged in the living room. She must've started the second his dad left the house. Steve blinks at the new painting she's hung, crooked, above the mantle.

"*Stefano* , come here!" She waves him over, nearly teetering off her perch of pillows and throws. "I need your help deciding."

Steve casts a glance back at Billy, grimacing and rolling his eyes when Billy lifts a brow and mouths *Stefano* back at him. Shaking his head, he pads over and crosses his legs under himself to sit next to her.

"What are we deciding?" he asks.

Billy hovers in the archway between kitchen and living room.

"Which color, lovey?" His mother wiggles her toes. "Your father just phoned me-- we're going to Sacramento for a conference next week! California, isn't that wonderful?"

"Yeah," Steve's smile is tight, his shoulders heavy. "That's great, mom. You know, my friend Billy is from California."

He looks back, over at Billy, and jerks his chin. He watches Billy swallow thick and stay exactly where he is, and Steve would laugh if he wasn't too busy being stunned by the fact that Billy Hargrove is fidgeting with the bandana still wrapped around his right hand, by the fact that Billy Hargrove is stiff and even a bit wide eyed, by the fact that Billy Hargrove is *nervous* to meet Steve's *mother* .

His own eyes go a bit wide, and he straightens at the same time his mother peeps around his shoulder at Billy. With a gasp, she shoves to her feet, and Steve has to scramble to keep her from knocking over any of the open nail polish bottles onto the carpet, or her half empty hot toddy, as she stands and paces over to where Billy is looking increasingly more uneasy, her robe a swirl of silk behind her.

"*Stefano* ," she scolds, already reaching for Billy with both hands, and Steve knows the exact smile she must be giving him if Billy's darting eyes are anything to go by. "I expected you to bring that cute

chubby faced boy and that other gaggle that's always following after you like ducklings. I wish you would've warned me about our guest-- I would have dressed up."

Hanging his head between his shoulders, Steve sighs out a laugh and pushes up from the carpet, biting the insides of his lips to keep from laughing as his mother takes Billy's cheeks between her palms. " *Mi dispiace*, mama," he says as he comes up next to her.

"Oh, and he's lovely!" his mother's eyes gleam when she glances up at Steve, and for the second time in a single day, Steve gets to see Billy blush. "Much better than that other boy that used to hang around here-- Tony?"

"Tommy," Steve says, and Billy's eyes shoot to his, narrowing and full of every threat he's ever said out loud when he spots Steve's grin. "Billy, this is Mrs. Harrington. Mom, this is Billy Hargrove."

And whatever nerves Billy seemed to have had disappear. He turns on the charm, looks at Steve's mother like he does at Mrs. Wheeler, and holds out his good hand for her to take, grin lopsided and eyes carefully warm.

When she takes it, Billy brings his mother's hand to his mouth and presses a kiss to the backs of her knuckles. His eyes slide to Steve, sly and amused and maybe something like *this is payback, Harrington* , but Steve's smile stays steady and true. His mother's head falls back when she laughs.

"It's a pleasure, Mrs. Harrington." Billy says, a bit of a furrow between his brows. "Steve never mentioned what an absolute vision you are."

In the face of Billy Hargrove flirting with his mother, Steve lifts his mother's hot toddy to his lips and sips, free hand casual in his back pocket. The wrinkle between Billy's brows curves deeper.

"And better behaved than that little troll, too." His mother hums, and she pulls her hand free from Billy's hold to pat him on the cheek twice. "Though, I'll have to tell you, Mr. Hargrove: that charm and those darling bedroom eyes of yours will do you no good."

Steve's smile finally breaks into a grin and Billy's eyes are wide on Steve's face. *Sorry*, Steve mouths, completely unapologetic, but Billy is already grinning too, with sharp white teeth and delight.

"You must get that kind of attention all the time," he says to Steve's mother, but he's looking at Steve.

"Yes," his mother says simply and then plucks the glass from Steve's fingers before he can stop her. "Now, I'm going to go finish painting my nails. Unless you'd like to help, I suggest you take your friend upstairs, *Stefano*. I don't want the living room messed up."

"Of course, mama." Steve kisses her cheek, and under Billy's scrutiny, he burns across the bridge of his nose and the peaks of his cheeks. "Go with the burgundy."

"Such a good eye," she hums, rolls up onto her toes to kiss Steve's cheeks in return. "Lovely meeting you, Billy."

"You too, Mrs. Harrington."

Steve leads Billy back through the kitchen without much preamble. They pause long enough to snag a couple of beers out of the fridge, and then Steve is inviting Billy Hargrove up to his room.

Distantly, Steve realizes that his life is very strange.

When they get to his room, it's quiet. Almost unbearably so. Billy doesn't whistle at the size of it or tease him for the rumpled bed. He doesn't say anything; just trails his fingers along the edge of Steve's desk as he idles through, takes in the few posters Steve has tacked to the walls over the years, and nudges at the messy pile of clothes that's accumulated at the foot of Steve's bed with a socked toe.

Unable to stand it, the silence and Billy walking around in socks in his bedroom, Steve cracks open one of his beers and nurses it as he ambles over to his cassette player. He searches through a few tapes and a number of mixtapes and eventually settles on one he doesn't think Billy will try to strangle him for.

The steady cacophony of drums and cymbals and bass trembles through the speakers. Steve takes another heavy swallow from his

can and sets the spares down beside his stereo. His toes tap a bit when the beat kicks in, and when he turns, he finds Billy standing at his windows, pulling the curtains aside, to stare down into the backyard.

The air punches right out of him. Blue light from the pool outback reflecting up onto Billy's face.

In his hand, the aluminium of the beer can groans.

"CCR," Billy finally says, glancing over at him. "Old school."

"I like old school," Steve says, but his voice sounds all wrong, and he's glancing between Billy and the window and Billy and--

Billy must get the picture. He lets the drapes fall back into place, blocking out the view from down below, and steps back.

"You sleep looking out over the place that gives you nightmares?" he asks, but really he's just saying it, eyeing Steve as he cracks open his own beer. "That's fucked, Harrington."

"Don't do much sleeping in here, to be honest."

Usually, that kind of statement would get him a leering comment, a flash of tongue, something to lighten the mood that's trying to suffocate them. Instead, Billy just looks down at Steve's bed and then back up at Steve, taking a slow pull from his beer.

Steve doesn't understand that look, but he burns under it anyway. It makes something pull in his chest and just below his navel. The tips of his ears and the back of his neck feel hot. He drops his eyes to the beer tab on his can, bending it forward with an idle finger, and stuffs his other hand in his pocket because he doesn't know what else to do with it -- and it's insane but he feels like he's twelve again and trying to work up the gumption to ask Janet to dance.

John Fogerty rasps and wails and drolls in the background about devils on the loose.

"Well," Billy clears his throat, plops down into the edge of Steve's bed, and grins. "Your mom is something else."

Something in Steve's chest unwinds, and he laughs as he nods. "She's in a good mood tonight."

"She ever in a bad mood?"

Steve shrugs, shuffling over to drag his desk chair out, sitting with his elbows on his knees. "The living room will be trashed come morning."

Billy frowns, leaning forward, head cocked. "Why's that?"

"Dunno, she just-- she does stuff like that. Organizes and reorganizes, likes it one moment, hates it the next." Steve grimaces around his next drink, bubbles burning down. "One summer, when I was eight, we spent a week painting all the walls blue because she read somewhere it was calming. Week after that, we were repainting them all yellow. Week after that, she took a hammer to the guest bedroom and burnt all the drapes in the house."

"She crazy?"

Steve winces. "Not-- No. Not the way you're thinking. She just... has mood swings."

With a hum, Billy nods, and when Steve looks up, his eyes are gentle with understanding. "My mom was batshit. Heard voices and shit."

Blinking, Steve's lips part, a little *oh* escaping him, but Billy is already shrugging him off.

"She was sweet. Beautiful, blonde, like any beach babe you'd ever seen. Just not all there."

Steve bites down hard on the inside of his cheek. "Is she...?"

"Dead. Long time ago."

Steve doesn't say *sorry*. Doesn't say *I'm sorry for your loss*. Doesn't say *Jesus, Billy, that's fucking awful*.

Instead, he holds out his beer can and smiles when Billy taps his own to it. They both drink and Steve sighs when he's finished his.

"This was not how I was expecting this day to go," he says.

"Oh?" Billy waggles his brows, lounges back against Steve's bed with a hand, spreads his knees. "How did you expect it to go? Cuz last night you were painting a pretty interesting picture."

"Pretty sure that was you."

"No, no," Billy's smile is cocky and wide. "I think you implied something about some solitary self-indulgence."

"Which is gonna be difficult for you, now." Steve nods his head toward the red bandana, ignoring the hint of Billy's tongue between the white edges of his teeth. "How's the hand?"

"Throbbing like a motherfucker."

"You want some ice?"

"You playing at nurse now, too, pretty boy?" Billy's eyes wrinkle at the corners. "You're like the jack of all trades -- babysitter, golden boy, medical professional--"

"Ice or no ice?"

Billy huffs, but he's still smiling as he gestures to the cold beers by the stereo. "Pass me one of those."

Pushing to his feet, Steve grabs two as the track on the cassette switches over to *Green River*. He pads back, can dangling from his fingertips for Billy, and Billy's eyes lock with Steve's as he drains his first and sets it aside.

His gaze hooks into him, keeps Steve standing there at the edge of the bed, as he takes the beer, as he rolls it between his palms, as he licks his lower lip back between his teeth, like he's thinking about saying something or doing something or both. Steve only looks away when Billy pulls up the hem of his shirt to press the cool relief of the beer can against the mottled bruises along his ribcage.

Steve drops his beer. "Jesus, Hargrove!"

“It's nothing--”

But Steve is dropping to his knees on the plush carpet, between the open vee of Billy's thighs, and leaning in to tug Billy's shirt higher. His eyes go wide at the patchwork of yellow and purple and blue bleeding together over the gold of his skin.

He reaches out, fingertips just ghosting against his side, and Billy's breath catches and his skin jumps and the muscles in his abdomen wind tight. He catches Steve's wrist with a big hand, eyes impossibly dark in the dim light of the room, nostrils flaring and jaw ticking dangerously. His fingers curl unyieldingly around Steve's wrist, vice enough to earn a hiss, and then he's releasing his grip to a loose hold, thumb moving to press into the meat of Steve's palm. Steve's hand spasms.

“Easy, pretty boy. I might get the wrong idea.”

It sounds like it's supposed to be one of their usual barbs. Like Billy is trying to deflect, make light of it, turn it into a joke.

But Steve feels like he's teetering on the knife edge of something completely different. Something completely beyond his comprehension, with a depth that's as tempting and daunting as one of Billy's grins.

So he stares up at Billy, curls his fingers tight into the soft cotton of his shirt, and says:

“You're staying here tonight, in the guest bedroom. You're not going back there.”

He doesn't say *your dad is an asshole and I hate him* or *I'd let a demodog eat him because no one should ever do this to their child* or *you're a beautiful, broken piece of shit but so am I*.

He doesn't say *your skin is soft* or *your hand is warm* or *your eyes are so fucking pretty, I can't stand it*.

He doesn't say any of that, but Billy holds his gaze and nods and squeezes, once, at Steve's wrist with such soft, hesitant gratitude that Steve wants nothing more than to be that soft too, as Billy says:

“Okay.”

10. I've set my sights on you (and no one else will do)

Notes for the Chapter:

Aka: I want your love

Notes: three things... 1) FINALLY, THIS MONSTER CHAPTER IS DONE, CAN YOU IMAGINE IF I'D TRIED TO POST IT ALL AS A SINGLE ONE, FUCK MY LIFE; 2) technically, "The Hitcher" didn't come out until 1986, but I'm a sucker for a good horror movie, and I had to, don't judge me; 3) while "Blade Runner" is now considered a cult classic (and its sequel destroyed my ass), back when it first came out in the 80s it wasn't all that popular, which is why Steve has NO CLUE about what Dustin is talking about later. So... yeah.

Warnings: homophobic language; mild dissociation; Victorian hand porn; Billy Hargrove being Extra; gay panic; good god, good things don't happen to me panic; did I mention the Victorian hand porn?; Billy's face

The transition from top dog to dethroned royalty had been a subtle thing. It had taken months for it to become obvious Steve had lost interest in his crown. Even still, there were some who looked at Steve as he passed in the hall and saw the makings of a king in his profile. Still girls who flirted, who tittered and bat their lashes. Still guys who looked to Steve after a joke or for a party.

When Billy had shown up, that had mellowed more. It was a little more obvious. Billy very quickly claimed the empty throne for himself. Reestablished the roles everyone thought they knew, filled his court with whatever lemming bowed deepest. Like a whirlwind, Billy came in and shook up the foundations.

It's the same when, one week, Billy is needling Steve in passing or in class to keep him in his place, and the next, he's walking down the halls with his arm slung around Steve's shoulders like they've been

friends for years and hadn't just spent an exhausting weekend playing emotional *tradesies* and realizing they had a decent amount in common after months of antagonism. It's like the entire school can feel the earth shifting beneath their feet, plates realigning into something new, but they don't know what or how-- or if it's good or bad.

Just that Steve is openly laughing at something Billy has just muttered into his ear and that Billy looks at ease at Steve's side. Just that the new king has made an alliance with the old and nothing is sure anymore.

They're a contrast of color and style. Billy's jeans are torn, his hair a mess of gold curls, his jacket leather and dark as his worn *Van Halen* shirt. He clashes with Steve's neat coif, with his garrish coat, with the cream cable knit sweater beneath it, and the baby blue polo beneath that.

"Careful, Harrington." Billy says, winking as they pass Sharon and Janet and Carol where they stand, watching, from their lockers, eyes wide and going wider when Steve grins their way too. "People might get the wrong idea, seeing you laugh like that on my arm."

"What, that we get along?" Steve asks, shuffling out from under Billy's touch as they come up on his locker, and pulling his backpack around to pile in his books for the day.

Leaning against the locker next to him, propped up on an arm, Billy grins. "That we're flirting."

"Oh, is that what you're doing?" Steve casts a sly look his way, out of the corner of his eye, shrugging out of his jacket and shoving it into his locker. "Your game needs some work, Hargrove. Want some pointers?"

Eyes narrowed, Billy leans in that much more, until Steve can feel the heat of his body along his side once again, and he's not sure what line they'd crossed that weekend, but Billy seems to have abandoned any personal boundaries since Saturday. He practically cages Steve in against his open locker door, and Steve doesn't even bother leaning away.

“Trust me, pretty boy.” Billy’s smile goes crooked; charming. “You’d know if I was putting the moves on you.”

Steve twists to face him, arms crossing, shoulder tucking casually against the frame of his open locker, and there’s a quip on the tip of his tongue; a quip that Billy is anticipating if the way his eyes dart down to Steve’s lips are any indication. It never gets to leave his mouth.

From Billy’s flank, Tommy sidles up with Carol curled into his side, smile greasy and slick as the stupid gel he’s styled his hair back with.

It makes his ears stick out comically from his freckled face, but Steve bites that comment back. He can see the way Tommy’s eyes are flitting between him and Billy, quick and a bit frantic, and Steve remembers seeing that same look on Tommy’s face two autumns previous and feels a pang of pity in his gut that twists his mouth into a moue.

Sycophant , Nancy had once said. Steve can’t help but agree.

With a frown, Billy follows Steve’s gaze, shoulders drawing tight when he spots Tommy’s grinning face. His fingers flex, somewhere above Steve’s head, where his hand is still planted against the cool metal of the locker doors.

“Billy, hey, man.” Tommy jerks his chin up in greeting. “Didn’t see you at Tanya’s this weekend.”

Steve knows, just by the look on Billy’s face, that if they were anywhere but the school hallway, he’d be lighting up a cigarette right about now. “I got busy.”

Tommy’s eyes flit to Steve. “Oh? Doing what?”

“Getting high,” Billy says, and Steve blinks at him as Billy snakes his arm around his back again, squeezing him close with a hand on his shoulder, a little rougher than he’d been earlier when it was casual and easy and not for some kind of show. “Harrington, here, has the good stuff. Don’t you, Harrington?”

Steve’s brows draw together over his eyes when Billy looks to him,

and he's seen that look before in the Wheeler's basement, and something in Steve's chest warms at the hint of Billy's tongue that says: *play with me* .

"Uh, yeah." Steve nods, a bit slow, and then more firmly when he feels the slow drag of Billy's thumb brushing back and forth against the line of his shoulder blade. "I mean, Tommy should know. He's been to my place on a slow weekend before."

And Tommy knows exactly what he's talking about. Knows exactly the kind of high quality shit Steve's gotten his hands on before.

Carol actually *perks* at the implication.

"That's right," Billy snaps his fingers, gesturing between Tommy and Steve with a lazy hand and a lazier grin. "You two used to hang out, didn't you?"

Tommy's lips have pressed thin; his freckles stand out even more with how red his face is getting.

Carol elbows him. "Tommy," she hisses.

"Yeah," Tommy forces a grin. "Didn't know you still did shit like that, anymore, Stevie. You know, fun shit."

"There's a lot you don't know about me, anymore." Steve says.

"I know you're still trying to buy your friends," Tommy sneers, and Carol's hand bunches in his shirt as she gives it a firm tug.

Steve knows he shouldn't take it to heart. That, in the past, it had been true, but now he's got friends he'd never have to purchase.

It doesn't stop his shoulders from drawing tight or his back molars grinding. It doesn't stop the cold heat of shame flaring in his chest, up his neck, and to his face.

"At least the friends I have now aren't *cheap enough* to buy," Steve snaps. "At least they don't *want* to be *bought* ."

"Oh, yeah, I'm sure the princess and her *fag* don't--"

Like a wire snapping, Steve lunges forward. Carol squeals and peels away, hands coming up to cover her face, but Steve doesn't get close enough to land a blow on Tommy anyway.

Billy catches him around the chest and jerks him back. His whole body is burning, but Billy is somehow hotter, at his back, with his arm around his chest, and his breath in his ear.

"Easy, Harrington." Billy says, and he can hear the smile in his voice and it makes Steve's scalp tingle, even as the fight rushes out of him and he goes pliant under Billy's coaxing, chest heaving under Billy's hand. "As much fun as it would be to watch you kick his ass, this isn't the time or the place."

"What the *fuck*, Hargrove?" Tommy practically shouts, and they've got a crowd now, wide eyes all watching and waiting. "Didn't you beat his face in a couple months ago? What the fuck happened to that?"

"Things change," Billy shrugs, and when he shuffles around Steve, putting himself between him and Tommy, like he thinks Steve might lunge again, his grin is as sharp and dangerous as any predators. "Turns out, Harrington and I have a bit more in common than I thought. I can see why he ruled the school. I can see why he ditched a pissant little pussy like you. Guy like you is only good for two things-- kissing ass and groveling for scraps."

Tommy sputters, going red up into his hair, and there's a collective murmuring as Billy drapes his arm back around Steve's shoulders. Some part of Steve thinks that the way Tommy gapes, the clownish red of his face, suits him. But Steve's head is kind of buzzing, palms kind of itching, and he kind of wants to drag Billy out of school and to the junkyard for the session they never got to have.

Gripping the back of Steve's neck, Billy squeezes at his nape, thumb a gentle pressure behind his right ear. It grounds him long enough to realize that there are witnesses to Tommy falling out of favor with the reigning king. That there are witnesses to Steve sliding into the open place on Billy's right, even as Billy pulls him close under his left arm, to Steve being graced back some high school notoriety. That Billy, with as little tact and care he showed the first time, is changing

the way things are.

“Word to the wise, Tommy boy,” Billy winks, pausing long enough to shut Steve’s locker for him, already turning them away from the growing spectacle. “Don’t bite the fuckin’ hand that feeds you.”

And then Billy is pulling him down the hall, away from Tommy’s wide eyes and open mouth, away from the buzzing students already whispering to each other about the new hierarchy. Steve feels his stomach roll and his palms are sweating, and he lets Billy lead him blindly around the corner, even if it’s in the opposite direction Steve needs to be going to actually get to class.

He’s trembling when Billy finally pulls him into an empty men’s room. He isn’t exactly sure why.

“You good?” Billy asks when he turns Steve to face him, hands on his arms, and Steve blinks at the furrow between Billy’s brows.

“Fine,” Steve mutters.

“You’re shaking,” Billy huffs.

“Just wasn’t expecting a total upheaval on Monday morning, I guess.” Steve says, and then he’s pulling from Billy’s touch, frown creasing his face. “What the hell was that about?”

“Oh, c’mon, like that asshole hasn’t been begging to be taken down a peg this entire time --”

“I’m not saying that, trust me.” Steve crosses his arms, shoulders hunching a bit. “It’s just-- you know I don’t give a shit about all of this. Why would you *bother*--?”

“Was it bullshit?” Billy asks, fingers curled into loose fists at his sides. “This weekend, when you said we were friends, was it bullshit?”

“No. No, of course not, man.”

“Well,” Billy holds out his hands, like that’s supposed to explain it all, and sighs when Steve’s brow doesn’t unfurrow. “That dick has been giving you shit since before I stepped foot in this place, Harrington.

And if you're my friend, if you're hanging with me, that doesn't fucking fly. Get it?"

Steve feels hot, suddenly, under his collar and the weight of their new bond. "You didn't have to do that."

The *for me* goes unsaid.

"Believe me, it wasn't a hardship. Brown nosers like Tommy are a dime a dozen." Billy shuffles closer a step, voice lowering, softening. "Besides... I wanted to."

Steve thinks there might be a *for you* that goes unsaid, too.

"Well... thanks." Steve swallows, arms tightening over his own chest, fingers digging into his own biceps, to keep himself from doing something stupid or saying something stupider. "I guess."

"You're welcome," Billy says, and he's all grins again, eyes wrinkling at the corners as the first period bell rings shrill overhead. "C'mon, King Steve, we've got a school to rule."

As much as Steve would like to deny it, when Billy takes him under his arm again to lead him back out into the hall, something warm like pride-- and maybe like something else-- unfurls in his chest.

By lunch, everyone knows that Steve and Billy are friends. Or, at the very least, that they've worked out some kind of truce and are, at the very least, willing to play at being friends.

So Steve isn't all that surprised when Nancy and Jonathan plop down into their usual seats across from him at the library table and look at him expectantly.

"What?" he asks around a mouthful of his mom's cold lasagna.

Nancy sucks in a breath. "Steve Harrington--"

Jonathan nudges her with his elbow, smiling when her cheeks puff out, and moving to take out his own lunch. "So, you and Billy are

friends now, huh?"

Steve swallows, nudging at a limp noodle with his fork. "I mean, yeah. It's kind of a new development. And it's not a big deal, nothing's gonna change or--"

He startles, as the chair next to him is pulled out and turned around, as Billy slides into the previously vacant spot on Steve's left, as Billy grins, cheeky and broad, at the three of them.

-- anything," Steve finishes dumbly, blinking at the side of Billy's face.

"Wheeler. Byers." Billy greets, folding his arms across the back of the chair. "How's it going?"

"Um." Jonathan shares a quick look with Nancy. "Good?"

"Yeah?" Billy reaches over to hook a finger into the tupperware holding Steve's lunch, dragging it an inch closer before Steve smacks his hand away, and his cheek dimples when he grins. "Get up to anything fun this weekend? Wild parties? Creepy lab experiments?"

Nancy nearly chokes. "Steve --!"

Steve nails Billy in the ankle with the toe of his sneaker.

"Ow, shit, Harrington. What the fuck--?"

When Billy catches sight of the look on Steve's face, the one that says *shut the fuck up*, he straightens from his casual slouch.

"Oh, right, sorry." But his smile says he's anything but. "I'm not supposed to know anything about that, am I?"

"Steve," Nancy says again, her voice a bit high, already pushing away from the table. "Can I talk to you for a moment? Alone?"

Slumping in his seat, Steve sighs and bobs his head. "Yeah, okay."

Billy pats him on the back as he stands, winking when Steve replies with a dirty glare, but it disappears off of his face the moment Nancy

rounds the table to catch Steve by the wrist.

She pulls him away, toward one of the private study rooms, and Steve can't help but drag his feet a little. He glances back, just long enough to see Billy rest forward on his elbows and grin at Jonathan.

"So, Jonny," he says, and if Steve wasn't too busy bracing for a Nancy Wheeler freak out, Jonathan's panicked look would've made him laugh. "Tell me about yourself. Because I'll be real honest, I only know what rumor says, and that ain't the prettiest picture."

"Uh, well--" he says, but whatever comes after is lost, because Nancy is shoving Steve into the study room and shutting the door.

"Steve, what the hell?" she rounds on him, and he's already got his hands up. " *What the hell*, Steve?"

"It's not what you're thinking--"

"Oh? Because you're such an expert at knowing what I'm thinking? How could you be so *stupid* --?"

" *Hey* ," Steve frowns, hands dropping to his sides. "Nance, cool it. I didn't--"

-- it was one thing when you were just blowing off steam, or whatever, but now? You just went and *told him* ? Do you have any idea what kind of trouble you could get in--?"

" *Nancy* ," Steve snaps, voice raising, and he's never done that before, and it shows in the way her teeth click shut and she blinks up at him.

"Are you actually gonna listen to what I have to say or are you just gonna yell at me some more?"

Lips pressed thin, Nancy's gaze drops, and Steve lets out a heavy sigh-- his own bluster bleeding right out of him. He takes a tentative step forward, places his hands on her shoulders, and squeezes when he feels her shudder.

"Sorry," she mumbles. "It's just-- telling anyone is really dangerous, Steve. You weren't there when Jonathan and I--"

"I know," Steve says, pulling her close and tucking her head under his chin when he feels her hands come up to clutch at his sides. "I know, Nance. But I didn't tell him much more than what was in the papers. Just... a few more details, mostly about my-- I dunno, my *involvement*, I guess."

"Why?" Nancy asks.

"I don't know, I--" Steve's heart lurches in his chest, remembering watching Billy storm away and fearing it would be for good; he swallows down the *I just didn't want him to leave; I was just trying to make him stay*, and he doesn't understand why he thinks it or why he can't say it. "I just had to. I don't know."

Nancy pulls back, slips out from under Steve's chin but not his arms, and he should want to kiss her. To soothe her. To pull her close again.

He doesn't.

"You care about him, don't you?" she asks, peering up at him, and Steve's mouth is suddenly so dry, his lungs so empty. "I thought-- I don't really know what I thought, but I didn't realize that it wasn't just for you. Going to the junkyard with him, doing whatever it is you do, it isn't just for you, is it? You care about him."

And Steve can't speak. Can't tell her *no, it wasn't just for me or he needs it too, almost as much as I do, maybe more* or *Nancy, if only you knew, you'd care too*.

So he nods, throat working, and Nancy offers up a close lipped smile that nearly breaks his heart.

"Oh, Steve." She breathes, reaching up and taking his face between her hands, and he leans into it for the comfort, for the familiarity, and doesn't want to kiss her and it's *terrifying*. "Okay. Okay, so... He knows. Kind of. And he's your... friend, now?"

"Yeah," Steve croaks. "Yeah, I mean, he makes me wanna pull my own hair out sometimes, but... it seems like a lot of my friends make me feel like that, these days."

Nancy laughs and Steve does too, and she leans up on her toes to kiss the corner of his mouth, and it doesn't feel like *bullshit* or like they're forcing themselves to be something they're not -- and Steve thinks *finally*.

"Okay," she says again, once she's flat on the ground, and her smile is sly and Steve *loves her* but he's not *in love* with her. "But if he tries anything stupid like opening his big mouth or beating you up or threatening the kids again, just remember, I know how to use Hopper's rifle."

And Steve snorts, shaking his head. "How could I ever forget what you look like with a gun?" he asks.

Nancy's cheeks go pink, and she pinches Steve's arm. "You're an idiot, Steve Harrington."

"Yeah," Steve agrees. "Yeah, I am."

And he lets her go.

When Friday rolls around, Steve thinks he has reached a new normal. A strange new normal, but stranger things have happened in Hawkins, Indiana.

While Steve had thought lunch on Monday had been an anomaly, stilted and awkward as it had been when Steve returned with Nancy to find his lunch half-eaten, Billy had shown up Tuesday, too. And then again on Wednesday. And when he plopped down on Thursday, reeking of the quick smoke he'd taken outside, Nancy had actually smiled at him and said *hey, Billy*, and Jonathan had passed over an apple he wasn't going to eat, and Steve had given him the extra bit of lunch he brought with him just in case the trend kept true.

It had. Billy had blinked at them with such wide eyes that Steve had to hide his smile in his sandwich, while Nancy and Jonathan exchanged one of those nonverbal looks that even Steve could barely read sometimes. He knew it was good, though, especially when Billy ended up laughing halfway through one of Nancy's rants about her

advanced trig class, when Jonathan made some snide comment about the teacher's toupee that left them all in stitches.

"They're not half bad," Billy had said, while walking Steve to class afterwards, shrugging and trying to play cool and Steve had seen right through it but didn't say a damn thing. "Wheeler and Byers, I mean."

"You're not half bad yourself." Steve had said, laughing when Billy shouldered into him, and dodging when Billy went to do it again after Steve added:

"When you're not being a dick, I mean. "

The face full of early March snow he'd gotten after class had been well worth it.

It isn't the only thing he has to get used to, but the sudden party invites, the manful slaps on the back, the simpering girls hanging around his locker are more familiar. A bit like stepping into a pair of well-worn shoes that he forgot he owned but doesn't quite fit into anymore.

Billy is kind enough-- *you're such an asshole* , Steve has told him, and likely will tell him later-- to hide his laugh into the fist of his hand when, come English, Jenny sits astride Steve's desk in a skirt that must do *nothing* to keep her warm in the dragging winter outside. Her legs are long and enticing, and Steve would be stupid not to appreciate a girl willing to put herself out there like that, but he squirms back in his seat and forces a smile anyways.

"Morning," he says.

"Morning," she beams down at him.

"Um," Steve clears his throat, face burning when he hears Billy snicker. "Can I help you with something?"

"Well, I know we've both got the same calc class, and I was thinking we could study together for that mid-term?" She tilts her head, and Steve can read between the lines and he can certainly read the slow twirl of her gold curls between her fingers. "Tonight, maybe?"

“Can’t. Sorry. I’ve-- Plans, I have plans.” Steve says, tongue feeling heavy and stupid in his mouth, and he wonders where all of his old charm went-- if maybe it died when Eleven closed The Gate too. “Sorry.”

Her lower lip juts. “Plans? What kind of plans?”

He sees Billy lean forward a bit, catching Steve’s gaze out of his periphery, and the inquiring brow he lifts. There’s frank curiosity there, in contrast with Jenny’s blatant interest, and Steve is stupid. He’s so stupid.

He hasn’t gotten laid *in months* . And here he is, about to turn a very beautiful, very willing chance down.

“Babysitting,” he confesses with a wince, and the line of Billy’s shoulders seems to go easy-- like they’d been tense before. “I’m babysitting tonight.”

“How sweet,” Jenny practically coos. “Well, Saturday, maybe?”

“Maybe--?”

“Perfect,” Jenny hops off of Steve’s desk, hair bouncing, and she leans down to peck Steve on the cheek. “Thanks, Steve. See you Saturday.”

“I didn’t--” Steve twists around, catching the sway of her hips as she files to the back of the room, and he slumps in his seat when she finally takes hers. “I didn’t say yes.”

“Babysitting, huh?” Billy asks, eyes bright, and Steve flips him off as he jerks his notebook out of his bag and slaps it onto his desk.

The rest of class goes by in a bit of a haze. They’re mostly working on their own, drafting final papers for *Jane Eyre* , and Steve writes and rewrites his thesis at least half a dozen times before he finally gives up and starts doodling in the margins of his notebook for the rest of the period.

He doesn’t know why he didn’t give Jenny an emphatic yes . He thinks, maybe, that ever since Nancy, the idea of a casual hook-up

doesn't appeal to him anymore. That he needs to feel a connection, or at least be on the same frequency, with another person before he can think about sliding between the sheets with them.

Since Monday, it seems like more and more girls have started lining up to catch *King Steve* again. Like Billy's very blatant approval of him has somehow made him an option again. Or like, by getting to Steve, they might get to Billy.

That thought makes Steve's stomach twist up in knots. He ends up tracing over the flower in the lower right hand corner of the page he's on, drawing more and more teeth each time, until the center is a dark mass of black.

It's only when they're wrapping up, the bell about to release them, that he snaps out of it. He blinks up from his messy sketch, and Billy's eyes are on him and on his notebook, and his brows are pinched tight. He leans in, resting on his elbows, and Steve slaps his notebook shut.

"Hey," his voice is low, coaxing, and Steve's face feels warm and his fingers feel cold. "Steve, you okay--?"

The bell rings sharply overhead, and the room is a clatter of noise. Steve winces, moving to tuck his things into his bags, and he's pushing to his feet when Ms. Klein calls for him from the front of the room.

"Could you stay a moment?" she asks. "I promise not to keep you long."

Steve glances at Billy, sees him moving slow, gathering his things with much more care than he usually would. Forcing a tight grin, Steve nods his head toward the door, and Billy must understand because he slings his bag over a shoulder and heads for the exit with everyone else, despite the thin press of his lips.

Hesitating, Steve waits until the room is clear, and then he heads up to the front of the room to sit across from Ms. Klein's desk. She smiles at him, sweet as ever, and pulls out the paper he gave her nearly a month previous.

"I just wanted to touch bases again," she says. "Have you given this anymore thought?"

Steve sinks down in his seat. "Not-- Um, I mean, not really? Things have been-- Well, it's senior year, and things have been kind of... crazy."

Ms. Klein hums. "I understand, Mr. Harrington, really. But there are deadlines you need to think about, if college is something you want to aim for. You've missed all of the early admission cut-offs. There's still a few local colleges with rolling admissions, but..."

"Right," Steve swallows; bobs his head and rakes his hair out of his face when it falls into his eyes. "Yeah, I know. I'm just... still not sure."

"And you don't need to be," Ms. Klein says, smiling and leaning forward across her desk, and Steve's gaze flits to the ridiculous pattern of rain clouds and umbrellas that cover the fuzzy pink wool of her sweater. "There's nothing wrong with not being able to decide, now. I just wanted to know if you were still interested."

"I-- I am. Really. I just--"

"New deal," Ms. Klein says. "How about you work on a draft this weekend. Get it to me on Monday, and we'll go from there. It could be a paragraph, it could be five pages. It's up to you."

Steve nods, a bit slow, and breathes out carefully through his nose. "Yeah, okay. I can do that."

"Good," Ms. Klein sits back in her seat. "Now, get to lunch. I think your friend is waiting."

When Steve looks toward the door, Billy is leaning against the lockers on the opposite side of the hall. Steve feels a wash of prickling heat flood through him, and he shoves to his feet, offering a terse smile and a *have a good weekend* to Ms. Klein as he goes.

Billy shoves off the line of lockers when he steps out, but Steve doesn't look at him. He turns sharp, in the the direction of the library, clutching the strap of his backpack with a white knuckle grip,

and ignores Billy when he calls after him.

He doesn't stop until he feels Billy's hand on his arm, and when he does, it's to twist around abruptly enough to jerk out of his hold. "Have fun eavesdropping?" he sneers.

Billy blinks, takes a step back, and holds up his hands. "Whoa, Harrington, I wasn't fucking eavesdropping on anything."

"Whatever," Steve huffs, and turns to walk away-- sucking in a sharp breath and closing his eyes when Billy *stops him* with an unyielding hand on his shoulder.

"I don't know what the fuck crawled up your ass in the last hour, princess, but I'm already fucking sick of it."

"Fuck off," Steve says, and Billy's fingers just dig in tighter as he turns Steve around to face him. "Seriously, Billy, fuck off --"

"What's the matter, Harrington?" Billy crowds in, but he's keeping his voice low, eyes straying to make sure no one is paying them too much mind. "You need to hit something? C'mon, then. I think I owe you a few free ones."

Steve *yanks* from his touch, like it burns, and it does. He stares at Billy incredulously, mouth opening and then closing again.

"I'm not going to *hit you* ," Steve finally says. " *Jesus* ."

"Well--" Billy's jaw flexes, and he strong arms Steve over to the side of the hall, so that they aren't standing in the middle of it. "Well, what the fuck do I gotta do to get you to stop... doing whatever the fuck it is you're doing?"

"What are you talking about? I'm not doing anything."

Billy's nostrils flare, and he steps that much closer. Steve can feel the way his fingers flex against his shoulder.

"You got that look, pretty boy." Billy mutters, and Steve feels something electric lance up his spine. "You went somewhere, *in class* , and it's obviously not a very nice place. Because now, you're acting

like a pissy bitch over, what? College admissions? I don't fuckin' think so."

And the shame is white hot in Steve's chest and on his face. His eyes fall, down to the scuffed leather of Billy's boots.

His jaw works, fingers curling and uncurling over the strap of his backpack. Billy's hand is steady and warm on his shoulder. Steve wants to lean into it but doesn't think he can.

"Hey," Billy reaches up, touches Steve's chin, just briefly; nothing like the lingering way he'd held Steve's jaw at the junkyard, but it's enough, and Steve blinks up at him. "C'mon, Harrington. Talk to me, right? That's the deal?"

Steve doesn't know how to say it. Doesn't know how to look Billy in the eye and tell him *the pressure is killing me* or *the idea of seeing you with some girl hanging off your arm fills me up with so much dread it's like looking straight into a face full of teeth*.

He sucks in a short breath and shrugs, out of Billy's touch and out of Billy's space, plastering on a smile Billy sees right through. "Sorry. You're right, I just-- Got caught up in my head, and then-- then there's this whole stupid shit with applications and figuring out if I even *want* to apply and it's stupid, you're right, *I'm* stupid--"

"When the fuck have I ever called you stupid?" Billy shakes his head, frowning, and Steve can't help but laugh.

"You-- You haven't," Steve says, wetting his lips, and he scoffs out another little laugh, and it tastes a bit like disbelief in his mouth. "You haven't."

Billy searches over his face, mouth twisting up like he's far from satisfied and will definitely be asking later, but he lets out a noisy breath and nods anyways. "Alright. Just a shitty day, huh?"

"Real shitty."

"Okay," Billy nods again. "You babysitting all night?"

"No. I'm just watching Dustin while Mrs. H is out on a date," Steve

says. "Lucas is home sick, so there's no DnD tonight."

"I still can't believe you play that stupid game," Billy snorts, but there's something soft in his expression, something fond.

"Don't knock it 'til you try it, or some shit."

Billy finally laughs, finally relaxes, and he slides his arm around Steve's shoulders to lead him toward the library.

"Whatever, amigo. Let's go before Wheeler tries to track us down and accuse me of murdering you, or *some shit*."

Steve lets him. Finally feels something untwist in him.

It's not until they're halfway down the hall that he finally leans in a bit, smile a bit more earnest when he says:

"Thanks, Hargrove."

Billy glances over at him, and Steve isn't sure if he imagines it or not, but he thinks Billy squeezes him closer. "Don't mention it, Harrington."

Steve doesn't see Billy until school has let out after eating lunch with him, Nancy, and Jonathan. When he does, it's in the parking lot, and Billy is actually leaning against Steve's Beamer, grinning down at a junior whose back is pressed to Steve's door.

Her head is back as she laughs, and Billy glances up when Steve stops by the car, grin dimpling his cheek in that *I'm charming Mrs. Wheeler* way. Steve rolls his eyes and clears his throat.

"Oh!" The junior-- *Emily* ?-- blinks up at Steve, rocking up onto her toes, and her cheeks turn a lovely pink as she looks between Billy and Steve. "Hi, Steve. I was going to ask if you were free tonight--"

--but I told Emma, here, you were sacrificing your time for the greater good," Billy says. "Babysitting, and all that."

“Right,” Steve says, a bit slow.

“Right,” Emma repeats, shoulders falling a bit. “It’s just-- I already got tickets to the movies tonight, and my friend bailed last second.”

Steve offers a small smile. “Sorry. Really wish I could.”

“Of course,” she nods, stepping away from the Beamer, and Billy winks at Steve when her back is to them in a way that might mean *I’ve got your back, amigo* but might also just be Billy being an ass, and Steve has to bite down on the inside of his cheek hard so that he doesn’t grin like an idiot-- when Emma turns back around, her big doe eyes on Billy. “You’re not babysitting tonight, are you, Billy?”

Billy falters. “What?”

“You don’t have any plans?” she asks.

“No, not until--” Billy’s eyes dart to Steve. “--later.”

“Then maybe you could go with me?” Emma’s head tilts. “I mean, I’d *hate* for the ticket to go to waste.”

Steve grips his keys so tight that they dig into his palm. He watches, as Billy looks at him and then back at Emma, and *burns* .

Because then Billy is smiling again, all slick charm and white teeth and zero substance, nodding as Steve’s insides go up in flames.

“Sure,” Billy says. “It’s a date.”

“Rad!” Emma bounces on her toes again. “Tonight, seven o’clock. Meet me there?”

“It’ll be my pleasure,” Billy says, and Steve wishes he’d taken him up on the offer to hit him earlier.

“Bye, Billy.” Emma waves, already walking away. “Bye, Steve.”

She turns, walking away to join a gaggle of girls across the parking lot. Even from the Beamer, Steve can hear them laugh, and he forces himself to uncurl the fingers that had locked tight around his own

keys.

When he looks back at Billy, he's met with an almost sheepish smile.

"You don't mind, do you, Harrington?" Billy asks.

"Why would I mind?" Steve's face shrugs, and Billy's eyes narrow.

"Don't wanna step on any toes," Billy says. "If you're in to her, I just won't show."

"I'm not. In to her, I mean." Steve replies, stepping up to the driver's side door and gesturing for Billy to move away from where he's still propped against it. "Do you mind?"

"She's not your type, anyway, right?" Billy asks, not moving, and Steve feels hot under his coat, even though it's already dropped into the forties.

"My type?" Steve glances at him, and Billy's grin goes wide, like he's just figured something out.

"Yeah, y'know." Billy leans in, brows up. " *Someone who can kick your ass ?*"

"Oh," Steve swallows. "Yeah, no. Not my type."

With a hum, Billy finally shoves off of the Beamer, hooking his thumbs into the front pockets of his jeans-- stupidly tight, as usual. "Cool. We're good, then."

"Yeah, we're good."

"When are you done watching the rugrat?"

"I'm supposed to have him home by ten," Steve says, watching as Billy backpedals toward where he's got the Camaro parked. "You, uh... wanna hang out, after?"

"Maybe," Billy shrugs, but he's still grinning, and Steve doesn't understand *why* . "We'll see how the night goes. Later, princess."

“Yeah,” Steve breathes as Billy finally turns away, watching the broad line of his shoulders as he goes, before finally ducking into the Beamer, still burning and itching somewhere deep under his skin and he still doesn’t understand *why* . “Later.”

Ten minutes later, when Dustin climbs into the passenger seat beaming and asks *what are we doing tonight ?*, Steve pauses, taps his thumb against the steering wheel, and twists to look at him.

“What do you think about catching a movie?” he asks.

And he still doesn’t understand *why* .

“Your mom is going to *fucking* kill me,” Steve groans.

“What my mom doesn’t know won’t hurt her, Steve.” Dustin says, clutching his movie ticket tight, like Steve might try and take it away any minute. “You don’t tell her, I don’t tell her, and we’re golden.”

“Yeah, as long as you don’t end up with night terrors or something,” Steve grunts as they idle up to the concessions stand. “One second, everything’s *golden* , and the next, she’s trying to suffocate me with snickerdoodles.”

Dustin nods his head sagely. “She’s a firm believer in killing things with kindness.”

“Shut up,” Steve says, laughing, and scrubs a hand through Dustin’s curls. “Pick out some candy or something.”

“Candy *and* a Rated-R film?” Dustin nudges into Steve’s side. “We’re living on the edge tonight, aren’t we?”

“Keep it up, and I won’t get you any popcorn.” Steve says. “At least your dentist will thank me.”

“My orthodontist is a cruel woman and you’re cruel for encouraging her,” Dustin insists, but he’s eyeing the Redvines while Steve smiles at the girl behind the counter, sliding over a few bills to cover the cost of their inevitable tooth decay.

He's got his arms loaded up with their drinks and the biggest popcorn Dustin could badger him into buying when they finally step into the dimly lit theatre. Dustin is practically bouncing, right at Steve's heels, a box of Raisinets for Steve clutched right next to his Redvines. He's got this dopey smile on his face, the kind that almost dwarfs his eyes, and he's babbling about one of the actors that's supposed to be starring in what they're about to see and how *he was so good in Blade Runner*, Steve, and Steve honestly doesn't have much of an idea about what he's talking about-- but it's nice to just listen to him get excited anyway.

They round the corner through the doors, eyes already searching for seats, and Steve stumbles to a stop when Dustin cuts his ramble short to say:

"Oh, hey, it's Billy. Hey, Billy!"

Steve follows the line of his eyes, traces it over to where Billy is blinking over at them from one of the center rows, and Steve feels suddenly and terribly underdressed for *the movies* of all things. Because while Billy has styled his curls, has put on one of those shirts that-- even unbuttoned practically to the navel-- are too tight over his shoulders and across his back, and has traded out his ratty jeans for his *nice pants* -- which are still jeans, but they're black-- Steve is still wearing the same collared shirt and sweater combo he'd had on at school all day. Worse, he's untucked his shirt from the waistband of his khakis, he's got the sleeves of it cuffed up past his elbows, and he's actually got his stupid, red sweater tied around his waist. Billy's wearing a damn earring; Steve didn't even restyle his hair.

His face burns a bit, and he waves as best he can with an arm full of snacks and other goodies. Billy's arm is around the back of Emma's seat, and he's leaning into her space, but his eyes are on Steve as Steve follows after Dustin up the stairs toward the back row where there are still open seats.

As they file in, the previews start, and Steve tries his best to ignore the way the light halos Billy's hair, ignore the shadow of his profile as he leans down toward his date, and he focuses instead on Dustin's running commentary about each trailer that plays across the screen.

He only settles when the *Tri Star Productions* logo finishes, their movie starting in a hush of a black screen and red font.

The moment Jim picks up John Ryder, Steve leans down toward Dustin. "If you *ever* pick up a hitchhiker, I'll kick your ass."

Dustin snorts and shoves a Redvine in Steve's face. "Shut up, Steve."

Grinning, Steve relaxes back, eyes on the screen. He gets pulled in, to the story and the strange tension building, and bites back a laugh when -- as John admits to having cut off the legs of the last guy that picked him up -- Dustin whispers a tense *holy shit* and squirms in his seat next to Steve.

He's definitely going to have nightmares and Steve's definitely going to get shit for it.

His amusement lasts right up until the movie takes a darker turn and there are kids on the line, and suddenly Steve is shifting in his seat too.

It's around that same time that, down toward the front, someone stands and upends their popcorn over their dates' head. The crowd in the theatre *boo* and hiss as the girl storms off, but Steve is honestly grateful for the tension it cuts, snorting as he takes a drink from his straw--

-- and then nearly choking on a mouthful of Coke when he sees Billy stand, brush off the popcorn clinging to him, and bow to the sparse bit of applause it earns him.

Dustin nudges an elbow into his side over their shared armrest, and Steve bats him away. "I don't think that's how dates are supposed to go," he mutters, and then says, "Oh, look, he's headed this way."

And, of course, Billy doesn't file out of the row and up the stairs to get to the back where Steve is sitting with Dustin. Instead, he's stepping up onto the seat and over the back, weaving his way through a chorus of *heys* and *assholes* to make his way up to the back row.

Steve slouches down in his seat, clutching his popcorn close, locked

on Billy as he draws nearer. Even as the rest of the theatre turns their eyes back to the screen, Steve is staring at him as he drops, unceremoniously, into the seat on Steve's left. His grin is bright, his eyes brighter, and Steve almost asks *what the actual hell* , but Billy is leaning around him to greet Dustin.

"Hey, geek."

"Hey, dickhole." Dustin smiles, ignoring the *shut up, assholes* tossed over shoulders their way. "Redvine?"

"Thanks," he plucks it away, lounging back and kicking up a foot to rest his boot on the back of the chair in front of him, and turns his attention to Steve. "Enjoying the show, Harrington?"

"I was--"

The girl in front of him twists around and shushes them.

Billy flips her off, sliding down a bit in his seat, so that Steve can hear him when he leans in and lowers his voice. "Didn't think I'd see you here."

"I'm full of surprises," Steve mumbles. "Could you make anymore of a spectacle of yourself?"

"Probably," Billy says and then bites into the Redvine Dustin gave him, still grinning. "Wanna see?"

"No," Steve says because he's very close to laughing and doesn't want to give Billy the satisfaction after already causing a scene; doesn't want to give in to the giddy rush that is spreading out from his chest. "Just-- shut up and watch the movie."

"Of course, your Majesty." Billy says and turns his focus forward.

Steve isn't sure if he's grateful or disappointed. He just knows that his ear is still burning from Billy's breath on his skin.

It takes him longer than he'd like to admit to get back into the film. The skin on his forearms rise and the back of his neck prickles. The heat of Billy on his left is distracting; their shoulders keep bumping

when they move. Steve can smell Billy's cologne, even over the salt and butter that clings the walls of the theatre.

Eventually, though, Steve is drawn back in. He munches, idly, at the popcorn in his lap, eyes wide on the screen-- even when Billy lifts the armrest so that he can steal some popcorn too and their knees knock against each other as they shift, silently, closer.

When Steve jumps, not fifteen minutes later, popcorn goes everywhere and Billy has to stifle a laugh. Steve would be embarrassed if half the theatre hadn't startled out of their seats when John Ryder reappeared, too. He glances at Billy, out of the corner of his eye, and Billy isn't even looking at the screen anymore. Steve eyes dart back to the movie, and he shifts slightly, grabbing at his soda just to keep his hands busy.

Then the gas station explodes, in a burst of fire and a shatter of glass, on the screen, and Steve is jerking again-- hand flying out to steady himself on the armrest and landing on Billy's thigh instead.

The second he's certain his heart isn't going to fly right out of his chest, he realizes just what he's done. Billy's thigh is warm, firm, under his jeans and under Steve's touch, and Steve's fingers reflexively curl tighter before flexing out as he goes to flinch away, a *sorry* burning on his tongue.

A *sorry* he never gets to say because Billy is catching him by the wrist. Because Billy is still staring right at him. Because Billy is canting his head, the light from the movie screen catching on his earring as it dances with the movement. Because Billy is watching him as his grip curls tighter over the delicate bones of Steve's wrist, fingertips pressing to the rush of the pulse that is ticking through his veins and that is deafening Steve as it pounds in his ears. Because Billy isn't grinning, or even smiling, just looking at Steve as he turns Steve's hand over in his.

Steve swallows, tongue pressing to the roof of his mouth so hard that his jaw aches, and Billy presses the back of Steve's hand down against his thigh, the material of his jeans soft against Steve's knuckles. He stares, chest heavy, as Billy's eyes narrow and burn down his nose, across his cheeks, along his jaw. His breath catches, sticking in his

throat, as Billy shifts his grip carefully over Steve's wrist until his thumb is digging into the meat of Steve's palm, and when his lips part, Billy's eyes burn there too.

The steady pressure of Billy's touch moves, drags along the heel of Steve's palm, until Steve's fingers spasm, curling inward. Billy fans them back out with the weight of his own, pressing Steve's hand open against the rough heat of his own palm, and Steve looks away sharply, toward the screen, when he feels Billy's fingers slip between his.

He hears Billy shift, the springs of the chair groaning, the soft material of his shirt dragging against the seat cushion at his back. He feels hot, and like he can't catch his breath, and Billy is tracing the lines of Steve's palm, is touching his fingertips to the soft heart of it, and then is dragging them back outward along the edges of Steve's trembling fingers until his whole hand twitches, splaying out under Billy's touch. He feels hot, and Billy's fingers are tracing his own as he leans close enough for the scent of him-- the rich spice of his cologne, the faint acidic tang of hair product, the hint of smoke-- to almost completely overwhelm him. He feels hot, but Billy's body is scorching against his, but Billy's breath is seering against the side of his face and the shell of his ear.

"Scared, Harrington?" he asks.

Steve shudders. "No," he whispers, but he's lying.

There's a loud *bang* that reverberates between the speakers, and Steve clutches at Billy's hand, their fingers tangling, entire body jolting. Steve's face warms as Billy laughs, low and sweet, his chin resting on Steve's shoulder.

"Relax, Steve." Billy says. "I've got you."

And then he's pulling away, pulling back, but he holds Steve's hand hostage in his. His thumb is a constant, steady stroke against the back of his, and Steve's fingers curl tighter, a shiver thrumming up from his core and leaving him weak and breathless and holding onto Billy Hargrove's hand like it's the only thing keeping him from vibrating right out of his own skin.

The rest of the movie passes in a blur of color and sound. Steve can't focus on anything outside of the heat of Billy's palm pressed to his own. Outside of the slow drag of his thumb, the subtle flex of his fingers, like he's reminding Steve that he's there-- as if Steve needs reminding.

By the time Jim is finally killing John Ryder, Steve is caught between complete exhaustion and buzzing nerves. By the time the credits begin to roll, Billy is squeezing at Steve's hand and delicately extracting his fingers from Steve's, and Steve's fingertips are prickling like he'd spent too much time out in the cold and his scalp is tingling and his heart is a mess.

Steve blinks, dazed, when the lights finally come back on.

"That was fucking *wild* ," Dustin says, and Steve nearly combusts on the spot until he realizes he meant the movie and not the fact that Steve just spent the better part of an hour holding hands with Billy Hargrove.

He shoves out of his seat on shaking legs and very nearly buckles right back down. "Uh, yeah. It-- That was crazy."

When Steve turns, Billy is still sitting, squinting up at Steve like he's trying to read him in bad light. Steve shuffles back a step, knocking into the row of seats behind him, and looks at Dustin if only to avoid looking at Billy.

Dustin pops up, beaming, and knocks into Steve's side. "Did you like it?" he asks.

Steve clears his throat, doesn't look at Billy, and says:

"Yes."

"Awesome," Dustin rocks up onto his toes, then glances over at Billy. "How about you?"

Steve can't help but look, then. Can't help but meet the impossible blue of Billy's eyes.

Billy grins, wide and leering, and lounges back against his seat--

spreading his knees and draping his arms along the back edges of the row. "Best time I've had in a while."

"Speaking of time," Steve flusters, grabbing Dustin by the back of his shirt, already steering him forward, toward the end of the row. "It's about time I got you home, isn't it, Dustin?"

"Aw, c'mon, Steve! My mom won't care."

"Your mom will murder me," Steve says, edging by Billy, and--

He stops, jarringly, when Billy reaches out and catches the hem of the sweater still tied around his waist. He swallows and doesn't look at him, the back of his neck hot, and Dustin frowns over his shoulder.

"The junkyard, Harrington." Billy says. "I'll meet you there."

It's not a question, but it feels like one anyways. Steve hesitates.

But then he nods, glancing down at him.

"Sure," Steve says, and Billy lets him go. "I'll meet you there."

And for some reason, it feels like a promise.

The entire drive to the Hendersons', Dustin fills the silence of the cab completely with what is essentially a summary of the movie. Steve's kind of grateful for it because he doesn't remember half of what happened, and he nods along in all the right places when Dustin says something like *wasn't that crazy?* or *I can't believe he did that, can you believe he did that?*

But when he's dropped him off, idling by the curb until Dustin has shut the front door behind himself, Steve is suffocated by the quiet around him. His breath comes unsteady, uncertain, and he thumps his forehead against his steering wheel a few times, clutching at it, like it might steady him.

"This is crazy, this is crazy, *this is crazy* ." He mutters to himself, but he's already pulling away from the curb and turning down the street

that will take him toward the junkyard.

He tries to convince himself to turn around, to go home, the whole ride there.

Then he rolls up, the glow of his headlights catching on Billy where he's leaning back against the hood of the Camaro, and all thoughts of running away leave him. His head grows muddled, hazy, and he flexes his left hand against the steering wheel like he can still feel the ghost of Billy's fingers between his.

Billy is watching him, or watching the car, as Steve kills the engine and the lights go off. In the dark, the only other lights streaming from the front of the Camaro and the stars hanging heavy overhead, Steve sees the cherry end of Billy's cigarette burn bright as he pulls a long drag and then arc across the sky as Billy flicks it away.

He shoves off the hood of his car and paces over, one hand tucked into the pocket of his leather jacket, and he uses the other to rap his knuckles against the top of the Beamer when he reaches Steve's door. Steve still hasn't unbuckled.

"C'mon, Harrington." Steve hears him say, muffled through the glass, but coaxing all the same. "I won't bite."

Steve's face burns at the implication, but he unbuckles with shaking hands and opens the door. Billy takes a step back, gives him just enough space to step out, and Steve catches the faint strains of David Bowie's *Golden Years* pouring out of the Camaro's open windows.

"Didn't take you for a Bowie fan," Steve says, shoving his hands into his pockets after he shuts his door behind him.

"Guy's got style," Billy shrugs, grin a bit crooked, eyes on Steve's face, and Steve has to stop his own gaze from straying.

It's cold out. Unbearably so.

Steve wants to pull on his sweater. Or climb back into his car and crank the heat. Or see if Billy's skin is as warm as it looks.

He gestures to the trunk of his car, instead. He forces his lead feet to

move, to step to the side, and clears his throat because he doesn't trust his voice.

"You want the crowbar--?"

"No," Billy says, reaching out and taking Steve by the forearm. "I'm not looking to break anything tonight."

"Then, what uhh--?" Steve stumbles forward a step as Billy pulls him, toward the Camaro, toward Billy. "What did you want to do?"

"C'mon, Harrington." Billy says, still smiling, and a lazy, languid heat spreads through Steve's limbs; makes him weak. "C'mere."

"What are we doing?" Steve breathes, and Billy's eyes wrinkle at the corners.

"Why'd you come to the movies tonight, Steve?"

"I-- Dustin wanted to go," Steve says, head swimming, and Billy purses his lips.

"You sure about that?"

"Yes," Steve mutters.

Billy's gaze has hooked into him, like Saturday, and Steve can't look away. Wouldn't want to.

The track in Billy's car switches over. The beat slows. Steve thinks it's *Heroes*, but he's not sure.

He feels numb and hypersensitive all at once. Like his nerves are firing off so rapidly that his body can't keep up. His heart is so loud in his ears, his breath so heavy, and he feels like if Billy were to let him go, he'd drift off or buckle right to the ground.

But Billy's hand on his wrist is like temptation itself, and Steve is weak under his touch.

"What are we doing?" Steve asks again. "Billy, what are we doing?"

Billy stops. They stand, halfway between Steve's car and the Camaro. Billy's fingers tighten around Steve's wrist.

"I ever tell you...?" Billy asks, voice so low and so deep, eyes dropping to Steve's mouth, and Steve shudders, helpless under the heat in Billy's gaze, under the weight of a storm on the horizon. "I ever tell you how good my name sounds on your lips?"

Steve sucks in a sharp breath. Nearly chokes on it.

Then, he lurches forward, catching Billy by the collar of his jacket, and Billy's eyes go wide as Steve presses his lips to Billy's.

It's not pretty. The angle is wrong, and Steve presses too hard, hits the corner of Billy's mouth more than the full bow of his lower lip. It's brief, chaste, and they fumble to keep upright as Steve throws Billy's balance off.

When Steve pulls back, Billy's eyes are still wide on Steve's face. His jaw has gone faintly slack, his lips parted, and Steve feels a frigid wash of humiliation quake through him. He jerks away, face on fire and fingertips numb, a litany of words spilling out of his mouth.

"Shit, I-- *Shit* , I'm sorry, I didn't--" Steve's throat works, and he trips backwards, and he needs to go-- he needs to *leave* . "I'm sorry--"

But then Billy is chasing after him, swallowing up the space Steve put between them, dragging Steve back close-- his arm winding around his waist, his hand shaking on the side of Steve's face as he reels him in and presses their mouths together.

Steve's entire body jerks, spasms, his heart pulling on a refrain of *Billy, Billy, Billy* . His lips are soft, his hands are firm, and he's so *warm* as he shuffles in so that there's nothing keeping them apart. He pulls back just so he can kiss Steve again.

Then he does it again. Then again. Then again, until Steve loses track, his hands clutching at Billy's shoulder and tangling into his hair.

" *Christ* , Harrington." Billy breathes, between the frantic press of their mouths. " *God* ."

His arm tightens around Steve's waist, bending Steve slightly back and bringing his hips closer as their legs tangle. Steve's hand fists into the curls at the back of Billy's head, and Billy's fingers tremble as he takes Steve's jaw between them and his thumb, angling his face so that he can lick past the part of Steve's lips.

The heat of Billy's tongue sliding against his is as exquisite as it is drugging. The chord of Steve's heart pulls taut, and he slumps into the cradle of Billy's arms, against his chest, draping his arm over Billy's shoulder and trying to clutch at his back, fingers curling into buttery soft leather. His head feels too heavy for his neck, his fingers clumsy, his hips desperate. His abdomen pulls tight, core trembling, and he ruts against the thigh that presses between his.

Billy groans and Steve can taste it as it buzzes across his tongue. It stirs a hunger in him-- for another, for skin, for *more* .

Sliding his fingers from the mess of Billy's hair, Steve seeks out the bare warmth of Billy's chest. Touches it, eases his palm over it and down, as they pant into each other's mouths, hardly parting for a gasp of the cool, night air. Steve follows the open line of Billy's shirt as Billy bites at his lip, as he kisses the corner of his mouth, as he mouths openly along the line of his jaw. Steve follows the flex of muscle to the line of Billy's ribs, moaning out heat into the clear black sky, and seizing slightly as Billy drags his teeth against a spot just under his ear, hands splaying out flat to Billy's back and his side and--

Hissing, Billy cringes away. Steve freezes, arching back to frown down at where his hand has disappeared beneath Billy's shirt, and it takes a long second before he remembers that there are bruises there.

"Fuck," Steve says, breathless and chest heaving, and his lips feel swollen and his skin feels electric. "Sorry, are you--?"

Billy's arm slips away, his hands easing up to Steve's wrists and gripping them tight, and he's *quaking* as he looks up at Steve, blue eyes wide, nose and cheeks flush, brows drawn and lips parted in a heartbreaking awe. He pulls Steve's hands away, takes a faltering step back, and shakes his head.

“I’m sorry,” he rasps, and Steve doesn’t know what he’s apologizing for, but Steve’s chest is already beginning to ache. “I’m sorry, Steve, I--”

Steve’s eyes burn. His throat feels dry.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and then he’s letting Steve go, turning around, and walking away.

Steve watches, nerves deadening, as Billy takes long strides toward his car. As he climbs into the Camaro. As he doesn’t look back.

Steve watches, numb and lost and breaking a little, as Billy drives away.

11. he never meant to do anything wrong

Notes for the Chapter:

AKA: It's gonna get worse if he waits too long

Warning: homophobic language, implied child abuse, Billy Hargrove unable to express his feelings, Steve's general fear of rejection, and a lot of not letting each other finish a sentence.

"Steve!" his father calls, from downstairs, and Steve groans and turns over in bed. "Steve Joseph Harrington, get down here! There's someone at the door for you!"

Flopping over onto his back, Steve blinks into wakefulness, staring blindly up at his ceiling. His entire body aches, feels too heavy, and the idea of getting out of bed seems more daunting than ever before.

Even if he hadn't come crawling into bed well past midnight, his sleep wouldn't have been anything but restless.

After the junkyard, after kissing Billy and watching him drive off, Steve hadn't known what to do. There was a part of him, a big part, that wanted nothing more than to sink to the ground and stay there. Let himself freeze in the night, in that junkyard, so that he would never have to face morning. So that he would never have to face Billy Hargrove again.

The other part of himself wanted to bring the crowbar in his trunk down on his own car until nothing remained.

He had done none of that.

Instead, he'd climbed into his car, started the engine, and drove. Drove until his headlights hit the familiar angles of the Byers' house, where he'd stopped and sat in idle, staring out the windshield, until the front door opened and Joyce Byers stepped out onto the porch.

By the time she'd reached his door, tapping lightly on the window, face pinched in worry, Steve had begun to shake. By the time she'd

opened his door, coaxed him out of his seat, he'd been crying -- face hot and eyes burning, tears rolling down his cheeks, silent and messy.

She hadn't asked him a single question, just wrapped her arm around him and ushered him toward the house, her small frame so fragile against his.

He'd let her sit him down on the couch, let her dig up a box of tissues, let her sit down on the coffee table in front of him and offer out a lit cigarette. He'd laughed when he saw it, taking it with trembling fingers, and took a few slow drags before wiping his eyes off on the back of his arm, shaking his head and laughing again as more tears came. His shoulders shook, as he started to cry in earnest, and Joyce rested a hand on his knee, smile grim and small across her mouth, as he hid his face from her.

It wasn't until after, when he was sitting with a cup of hot cocoa cradled against his chest and a blanket over his shoulders, that he realized he wasn't just crying about Billy. That it had been everything, all that had been weighing on him and that he had bottled up and that he hadn't let out. That Billy had been the catalyst, probably had been for a while, and kissing him, finally letting himself feel what he'd been unable-- or maybe unwilling-- to name, only to have to watch Billy walk away had been enough to finally push Steve to the point where he couldn't pretend to be *okay* anymore. That he wasn't fine and he hadn't been in a while and he finally couldn't burden it by himself anymore.

"Thank you," he'd croaked, and Joyce had rubbed circles into his back and cursed when Will came idling down the hall.

"Mom?" he'd blinked at her, then at Steve, and then he'd rapidly sobered from his half-woken state, eyes going owlsh before he darted off back down the hall, despite Joyce hissing after him.

Steve had been too tired to be embarrassed when Jonathan came out, pulling a shirt on over his head, sleep mussed and bleary eyed, stumbling down the hall as Will yanked him by the wrist. "What's going on--?" he'd faltered upon seeing Steve, going from barely awake to *very* awake in a manner so much like Will it was comical, and Joyce had hung her head. "Steve? What happened? You okay?"

"I'm fine," Steve had lied, curling around his mug a bit, and Joyce squeezed him close by the shoulders. "Really, I'm okay. Just... a weird night."

"Like, Upside Down, weird or...?"

"No. No, nothing like that."

Will had perked, hand still around Jonathan's wrist. "I can radio the guys--"

"No," Steve shook his head, fingers curling tight around his hot cocoa. "There's no-- It's nothing everyone needs to be worried about."

Will had nodded, but it was tentative. He'd hovered until Jonathan had made his way over to the couch, to hesitantly drape an arm around Steve, and then he'd edged back down the hall to his room while Jonathan and Joyce had let Steve sit and collect himself.

Steve hadn't thought much of it, then, or when he'd finally left the Byers' house around 1am after taking up too much of their time. But upon waking and finding Dustin at his front door, Steve's honestly not all that surprised that Will hadn't taken his word for it.

"Morning, Steve!" Dustin beams, and Steve blinks down at him, still in his pajamas, hair a mess, as Dustin rattles a Christmas tin around. "My mom was experimenting this morning with a new cookie recipe. Thought I'd bring them over."

"You're a terrible liar," Steve smiles, lopsided and a bit fond, but opens the door wide to let Dustin duck in under his arm and follows him into the kitchen where his parents are still eating brunch. "Mom, dad, you remember Dustin."

"Of course," his mother says, smiling from her spot on his dad's left. "Good morning, Dustin."

"Morning, Mrs. Harrington. Mr. Harrington." Dustin says. "You mind if I steal Steve for a bit? I have a science project due next week and I just can't finish it without Steve's help."

"Please, go right ahead." Steve's mother smiles, looking to his dad and nudging him, and he blinks up from his food and offers a terse nod.

"Of course," his dad says, wiping off his hands on a napkin, smile tight. "Just remember that we need you home for dinner tonight, Steve. It's the last one before we leave."

"I'll be here," Steve promises, and he's already pulling Dustin away, leading him back toward the stairs that lead up to his room. "See you tonight."

When they make it up to Steve's room, Dustin plops down onto Steve's unmade bed, brows up and expectant, and Steve closes his door with a roll of his eyes.

"Alright, so you're a halfway decent liar." Steve says, then steps into his bathroom to pull on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt; by the time he steps back out, Dustin is munching on one of the cookies in the tin, kicking his feet back and forth, still sitting on the edge of the bed. "What did Will say?"

"Just that you showed up at his house in the middle of the night, long after you dropped me off, where you were a little out of it but definitely fine." Dustin says, capping the tin and setting it on Steve's desk as he stands, dusting the crumbs off his fingers on his pant leg while Steve laces up his sneakers. "And if I remember correctly, which I do, you had agreed to meet up with Billy Hargrove, after you dropped me off, at the junkyard."

Dustin's got his fists on his hips, his eyes narrowed, and Steve loves this kid. Really, he does.

Even when he definitely does not want to talk about whatever Dustin is going to try and get him to talk about.

"So, if one and one makes two," Dustin says, eyeing Steve as he shrugs on his bomber, as he combs his fingers through his hair until it's at least a little less like a rats nest. "Billy Hargrove did something or said something that got you upset. Though, I'm not seeing any bruises. So I'm guessing he opened his big, dumb mouth and said

something. The question is: what?"

Zippering up his coat, Steve sighs. "How do you feel about pizza in the morning?"

"Big fan," Dustin says.

"Alright, let's go."

The arcade is a cacophony of flashing lights and blinding noise. Steve sits, curled into one side of the booth, watching as Dustin digs into his pizza with zeal. He'd distracted him with food and a few games of *Gauntlet* for as long as he could, but Dustin had eventually weaseled out the few details Steve was willing to give. He's mulling them over now, cheeks puffed out around an enormous bite, and he swallows it down with a swig of Coke.

"So he's an asshole," Dustin says. "I mean, he was already an asshole, but he's leveled up to, like, Super Asshole."

Steve sighs, elbows resting on the table. "He didn't do anything *wrong*, Dustin."

"He ditched you!"

"He didn't *ditch* me," Steve says. "He-- He left. After a very intense... conversation."

"*Right*, and during this... *intense conversation*," Dustin waggles his brows, and the back of Steve's neck warms. "He didn't *say* or *imply* anything, or-- are you really trying to stick with this whole *intense conversation* bullshit? I can tell you're not telling me stuff."

"How?" Steve frowns, swirling the ice in his soda around with a straw, other arm crossed in front of him on the table top as he hunches down.

"You get all turtle-ie when you're hiding something," Dustin says, bringing his shoulders up to his ears, wrapping his arms around himself-- mirroring Steve in outlandish excess.

Steve slumps, rolling his eyes, and he flicks his straw at Dustin, sprinkling him with Coke. "It's not important."

"You know I don't, like, *care* , right?" Dustin leans in. "My Uncle Weston is gay. Like, *really* gay, and--"

"I'm not," Steve says, firm, and Dustin blinks. "I'm not gay and this is not a conversation we should be having. At all."

"Okay," Dustin sips his soda, eyeing Steve for a moment. "So, you're not gay. But you like Billy, right? You don't have *intense conversations* with people you're not interested in--"

"Please, for the love of god, stop saying it like that."

-- so you may not be gay but maybe you're something --"

"We are not having this conversation. I am not having this conversation with you. You're a *child* --"

"I'm fourteen!"

-- you're *thirteen* --"

"Okay, I'm fourteen *next month* , close enough --"

-- and I am *still* not having this conversion with you."

"Why *not* --?" Dustin falters, blinking over Steve's shoulder. "Oh. Oh, no."

"Oh, no? What, *oh, no* ?" Steve twists around in the booth, spotting Max instantly, her eyes wide, stopped just inside the double doors of the arcade, red hair flying everywhere-- and she looks at them, looks at Steve, and then her expression firms, jaw clenching, and she bolts back out the doors. "Oh."

"*Shit*," Dustin hisses and Steve whips back around. "Shitshitshit."

"Dustin," Steve's voice drops, and he jabs a finger forward as Dustin sinks down into his booth, hiding behind his Coke. "Dustin, *tell me* you didn't tell the rest of the shitheads about me meeting up with

Billy.”

“ *Um .*”

“ *Dustin--!*”

“ I’m *sorry.*”

Steve groans, burying his face in his hands. “Oh, *no.*”

He’s debating bolting, torn between being frozen stiff and wanting to dart out the door, but then Dustin is kicking him under the table and Steve instinctively sinks down lower-- a string of curses muffled against his own palms. He hears the doors bang open, and a distinctive *hey* from Keith, before he ever hears Billy.

It seems as though Steve is still tuned to him, still strung tight for his *everything* , because the second he hears the low rumble of Billy’s *what the actual fuck, Maxine?* , his entire body tenses, his skin rises, and his heart picks up to kick at double time-- and with his chest already feeling bruised, it makes Steve curl forward, suck in a sharp breath, and squeeze his eyes shut. Dustin kicks at his shin again, and Steve is half tempted to dump the rest of his drink over Dustin’s head just to get him to stop.

But then Billy is there, at the edge of their table, Max’s hand fisted into the front of his shirt, her eyes blazing, daring Billy to try and walk away, and Steve blinks up at him. He looks about as shitty as Steve feels, like he was ridden rough and put away wet, and like he hadn’t gotten much-- if any-- sleep.

“Harrington,” he says, and his eyes are wide, and Steve still remembers what it was like to feel Billy’s mouth on his.

“Nope,” Steve says, shoving to his feet. “Absolutely not.”

Max’s head jerks back, her lips pursing, and both her and Billy blink at him. “What?”

“Dustin, have fun, I’ll be back to pick you up in an hour.” Steve says, and then he’s sliding out of the booth, sliding by Billy, and sliding on his coat as he heads for the door.

“Steve!” Dustin calls after him.

“An hour, Henderson,” Steve replies, shouldering through the door, and he turns long enough to see Max shoving Billy after him. “Be outside, or your ass is grass.”

He’s out the door before Billy can actually decide to follow after him, hands shoved into his pockets, and beating a path down the sidewalk toward Main Street. He knows if he gets in his car, tries to drive anywhere, he’ll end up at the junkyard, and that’s the *last* place he wants to be right now.

It isn’t until he’s about half a block down the road from the arcade that he hears Billy calling after him. His back molars grind, and it takes everything-- *everything* -- not to stop and turn to him.

“Harrington!” Steve’s shoulders hunch, fingers curling in his pockets. “Harrington, would you--? Slow *down* , would you?”

“Fuck off, Billy.” Steve says, with a surprising lack of venom, almost nonchalant, his eyes on his own two feet.

He rounds the corner onto Main. The old pharmacy is closed for the weekend, but the mom and pop diner beyond it is open. Steve spots a few classmates pour in and out; it’s a hotspot during weekends where there’s nothing going on because of their cheap fries, their cheaper malts, and their jukebox.

A hand grips his elbow, Billy’s fingers branding even through the sleeve of Steve’s bomber, and he’s jerked back a step before he can brace himself.

“Steve, goddamn it, *come on* .” Billy hisses, pulling him back, and Steve jerks around and jerks away. “I said I was--”

“ No ,” Steve spits. “I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to *talk* about it. It never *happened* .”

“It never-- *what* ?” Billy laughs, incredulous, eyes darting over Steve’s face, his brows pinched.

“That’s what you *want* , isn’t it?” Steve says, and he thinks he might

be baring his teeth, thinks he might be burning up from the inside out, and Billy's eyes are wide on his face. "Well, fuck you, Billy. I'm not some *experiment* --"

Billy's smile goes bitter, twisted, crooked. "Oh, Harrington, if only you *knew* --"

"I don't *care* ," Steve says, face red, chest hot, and he doesn't *care* -- not at all.

Except, he does. He's raw and he's hurt and he cares *too much* .

But he can't. He's barely holding himself together as it is; not just from Billy's rejection, but from everything.

"If you wanna play games, do it with someone else." Steve says. "I'm your *friend* . And even if I wasn't , it's still fucked up to-- to *string someone along* and then *leave* like they don't *matter* --"

"Steve," Billy's shaking his head, stepping closer, and Steve is stepping back, trying to keep their distance. "Steve, that wasn't-- That isn't what it was-- I wasn't--"

"I don't care, Billy." Steve says, and Billy stops, hands half out like he might try and reach for Steve, but Steve's too far away anyways. "It is what it is, right? It never happened, and we're not gonna talk about it. Okay?"

Billy's chest heaves on a few breaths, the flex of his jaw arresting as it is frustrating, and Billy drops his hands back to his sides. "Okay."

"Okay," Steve swallows, and he crosses his arms in front of himself and gestures over his shoulder toward the diner with a swing of his head. "I'm-- I'm gonna go. But I'll see you. On Monday. Okay?"

Billy's breath is still heavy, and it's still cold enough that it fogs in front of his face as he nods. "Yeah. Yeah, I'll see you on Monday."

"Okay. Bye, Billy." Steve says, backing up a step, and Billy is pulling out his cigarettes, tapping one out of the pack, and Steve thinks maybe he's shaking-- but he's not sure. Doesn't want to look too close.

"Later, Harrington." Billy says, but his eyes are on his own boots as he presses a cigarette between his lips, and Steve turns away, turns his back on Billy, and hates that he feels like it's one of the hardest things he's done since facing down a hoard of demodogs.

He picks up the pace, jerking open the diner door and stepping inside before he can change his mind.

Instantly, he's hit with a rush of heat. There's some old 50s tune playing on the jukebox, and Steve unzips out of his coat, stepping toward the line of seats by the bar top, when someone calls his name.

He looks over, half-dazed, and sees Jenny from English slipping out of a booth where a few of her friends are sitting. In the large window behind her, he can see Billy, still standing where Steve left him, dragging hard on his cigarette.

He forces a smile as Jenny comes up, ponytail delicately curled at the ends and swinging as she places soft, sweet fingers on his arm. "Hey," he says.

"Hi," she beams up at him. "This is so funny. I was gonna come over to your place in a little too study for that calc test, but here you are."

"Here I am," Steve says, a bit lamely, his smile lamer, but Jenny laughs.

"Perfect timing," she says already leading him toward her table, and her voice picks up a bit. "My friends were just leaving."

They scramble a bit, to accommodate her, and Steve recognizes a few of them from the cheerleading squad. They wave and giggle as they go, and Steve grunts as Jenny ushers him into the booth seat across from hers.

A waitress comes by after Steve settles, and he haltingly orders a strawberry shake and nothing else, before she's off and leaving them alone at their table. Steve is surprised when Jenny pulls out a notebook and her calc text from the bag on her left, but it makes something in his shoulders go easy as Jenny smiles over at him.

"I hope you don't mind," she says. "I'm *awful* at calculus."

"I'm not much better," Steve admits. "I think the last time math made sense to me was in eighth grade."

Jenny laughs again and nods, cracking open her book to the pages they've been working on for the majority of the semester. Her pen has a fuzzy bobble at the end, and Steve thinks it's honestly pretty cute.

"Well, you can't be any worse than me."

"I don't know about that," Steve says, and then, "I'm actually kind of relieved, though. I sort of thought studying was just an excuse to go out with me."

"Oh," Jenny blinks, lips parting, and Steve realizes belatedly that he's just said the wrong thing. "Well, I-- It kind of was. But you're not--?"

She cuts herself off as the waitress comes by with Steve's order. She sets his shake down, refills Jenny's water, and is off again. Leaving Steve to feel a bit stupid as Jenny offers up a weak smile.

The jukebox switches over. Something by The Rolling Stones starts playing.

"You're not interested in me, are you?"

Steve can't help but think about Billy, singing in his car.

Steve shakes his head, mouth a bit dry, and he leans forward. "No, no, that's not it. I'm just-- It's just, uh..."

"Not over your ex?"

And Steve knows she means Nancy. He knows that, maybe two weeks ago, she would've been right.

He glances out the window, and Billy is nowhere in sight. He swallows and slumps a bit, but nods.

"Something like that," he says.

"Well," Jenny perks up a bit, and her smile seems plastic, but her eyes are bright. "At least you're honest about it."

"I'm sorry," Steve says.

Jenny's smile goes a bit more soft, a bit more genuine. "You know, you're a lot sweeter than people give you credit for, Steve Harrington. Most guys wouldn't bother with an easy let down. They'd just get laid and never speak to me again."

"That's--" Steve's voice breaks; he doesn't say *that's something I would've done before* . "That's shitty."

"Pretty much," Jenny nods, fidgeting with the fuzzy bobble on her pen. "Since you're here, though, do you want to study a bit? I really am awful at calculus."

"Me too," Steve huffs out a laugh, but he's nodding too. "You have a piece of paper I can borrow?"

Jenny tears one right out of her notebook.

"Mom?" Steve raps his knuckles lightly on the door jamb to his parents' room, hovering, a bundle of silk in his hand. "I found your blouse. It was in the laundry room."

"Come in, *Stefano* ." His mother's voice calls from the walk-in closet across the room, and Steve pads toward it, finding his mother on the floor, all his father's ties laid out before her. "Which do you think will pair with my red dress best, lovey? I don't want to clash, and you've got the best eye for color."

His father is drinking down in his den, has been since dinner finished. Steve thinks he should be up here, helping his mother pack for him, but considering the slight manic look in her eyes, the mess of her hair, and the shake off her hands, he thinks maybe this is better.

He'd spent the better part of an hour studying with Jenny at the diner. When they'd finished, mostly because Steve had to go pick Dustin back up and drag him home, he'd apologized again to Jenny. She'd squinted up at him, hovering at his side outside of the diner, and said *you can always make it up to me* . When he'd asked her how, she told him that they needed more volunteers for the Spring Fling

coming up at the end of the month. Steve had been quick to agree.

After, when he was driving Dustin back to his house, he'd very firmly shut down any of his questions. He was-- *is* -- still too twisted up about the whole thing. About how *good* it had felt, and then how *bad* . About how Billy had looked at him earlier, standing on the sidewalk off of Main, trying to tell Steve what *it wasn't* , and Steve had been unable to let him despite how badly his body was screaming to know.

When he'd finally gotten home, it was close enough to dinner that he'd ended up in the kitchen, helping his mom cook while she hummed under her breath. It had helped him drown out the noise in his head, the parts of him still pounding to the beat of *Billy* and *last night* . His mother had kept spacing, pausing in a task or repeating it over and over, until Steve's only focus was on her, on the tremor in her fingers, and the glazed look in her eyes.

It's why he's kneeling now, in the closet with her, plucking up a tie for inspection and holding it out. "Go with this one," he says.

"*Perfecto* , darling." She kisses his cheek and plucks it away, tucking it into his dad's suitcase next to his socks.

He smiles and helps her fold a pair of slacks in next to what she already has. He hopes she won't end up making a mess of it later, when she finds she doesn't like the colors she's already chosen; the creases are perfect.

"How was your day?" she asks, even though she definitely already asked while they were cooking and again at dinner, and Steve hums, shrugging.

"Fine," Steve says. "Nothing too eventful."

"No?" she frowns, unknotting her hair from the top of her head as she sits back against her heels, and Steve can see the wrinkles in her fingers, on her face, when she looks at him like that. "Did you run into that lovely friend of yours? Billy, right?"

Steve's lips twist into a moue, fingers faltering over the blouse he's

folding in his lap. “Yeah, I saw him.”

“He’s a looker, isn’t he, *Stefano* ?” his mother smiles, head canting back, almost dreamily, and he watches as she twists a neat plait into her curls. “Such blue eyes. *Bellissimo* . If I had known a boy that pretty when I was your age, *Stefano* , I would’ve never married your father.”

Steve’s face colors. “Mama--”

“Don’t give me that look, *Stefano* .” She says, probably with a bit more force than she means too, because she softens in the next instant. “I’m just saying that I like him. And that you should bring him around more.”

Chuckling, Steve shakes his head, eyes straying down to the shirt draped over his thighs. “I don’t think that’ll be happening, mama.”

“No? Did something happen?” When he looks up again, her eyes are on him, blissfully focused, concern creasing her forehead. “He seemed to like you. Perhaps that’s the problem?”

“No, mama.” Steve says, almost to himself. “I don’t think he likes me enough.”

When she tilts her head and asks “how do you mean, darling?”, Steve’s gaze snaps down.

“Nothing. Just, uh... we had a disagreement. I don’t know if he’ll want to come over again. It’s not a big deal.”

“Stevie,” her lips purse, and she reaches out, resting a hand over his. “I know we aren’t around very often, but I’m still your mother. I can still listen. If you have something to say, I can still listen.”

Steve breathes out sharply through his nose, jaw working. He forgets, sometimes, how perceptive his mother is when she’s around.

How, even when she’s spent months away, she can still read him like a book.

It used to make him angry. Used to make something bitter and tangy fill his mouth. Now, he's not sure if he's grateful or frustrated.

Worse, he doesn't know if he wants to open up to her. He's angry and confused and hurt and scared, and there's so much that he can't say anyways-- so much weighing on his shoulders and back and chest, nightmares and fears and desires-- but he doesn't know if he can unburden himself. If he would even know where to begin.

"I... I don't know, mom. There's just a, uh-- there's a lot going on, you know?" Steve sighs, shoulders hanging. "School's gonna be over soon. I don't-- I don't really know what I... want to do. After. And then there's some-- well, there's some other stuff going on, and I'm not really sure how to handle it. Or if I even want to."

"Stuff that involves Billy?" she asks.

"Some of it," Steve chews on the inside of his cheek, and his eyes stray from hers. "I, uh... Well, mom, you know that I-- that I was with Nancy, right? That I loved her and I was with her-- and I still *do* love her, but it's different. It's better. And-- And girls are still, y'know, *great*, but um..."

"Oh, *caro mio*," his mother's fingers clench around his. "Did that silly boy turn you down? Is that what this is about?"

Steve blinks up at her, eyes going wide. "*Mom* --!"

"*Stronzo!*" she spits, and Steve bites out a laugh. "That little-- *Ooh*, I should have slapped him when I had the chance, making those *eyes* at you, only to-- You tell that boy *vaffanculo* when you see him next, tell him *I* said it--"

"Mama," Steve is laughing now, in earnest, eyes wrinkling around the corners as he holds his stomach. "Mama, it's not--"

"This summer, we're going to Florence, and we'll find you a much nicer man. An *Italian* man. You're *lovely*, darling, they will fall all over themselves for you-- the girls, too." She says. "You could use a whirlwind romance, you're so young, *Stefano* --"

"Mama," Steve reaches out, catches her by the shoulders, and

squeezes as she comes to a halt. “It’s-- We don’t need to do that. It’s fine. I promise. It was just a kiss.”

His mother huffs, settling back a bit, and she tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Well. Fine. But I still think we should go. If only to visit.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.” Steve nods, letting her go, and he sits back too, against the wall opposite her. “So... you really don’t care? That I-- Well, that I might like guys?”

Her eyes, big and round and brown just like his, go soft and sweet and fond. “Of course not, *mio caro* . I could not care less who you choose to love, as long as they love *you* .”

“And,” Steve’s throat works. “And if I still like girls?”

His mother’s smile broadens, spreads, and she holds out her hands. “Darling, what have I always said? Why not *both* ?”

With a snort, Steve nods, head dipping down as he stretches out his legs in front of himself. “Usually that’s just for pizza toppings.”

“I think pizza toppings are a perfectly good thing to model your life on,” his mother says primly, sniffing; then, she nudges at his foot where it’s resting by her hip. “So, tell me, *Stefano* . Your boy... was he any good?”

The tips of Steve’s ears turn pink. “*Mom* .”

“You said you kissed him!” she shrugs. “I just want to know if he was as good as he appeared to be--”

Steve throws the blouse in his lap at her. She catches it laughing.

The problem, Steve finds on Sunday after seeing his parents off-- *you call us at the hotel if you need us, Stefano, promise me* between kisses from his mother, and a *don't burn the place down* from his dad-- is that his house is very empty without them in it.

It's distracting, the silence below the hum of the record player in the corner of the living room. He can't focus, not on the paper he's supposed to be drafting for Ms. Klein, and even if he could, the only thing he keeps thinking about is Billy and how little his mother and even Dustin seemed to care.

What do you want? Ms. Klein's voice echoes, rattles around the back of his head, and he really doesn't think he can write *I want Billy Hargrove* and turn it in as an answer.

Besides, it's not the only thing he wants. It's just the only thing he can think about with his concentration so shot. It's what is most fresh in his mind-- from the kiss on Friday, to the confrontation on Saturday. And, perhaps, it's because Steve has *gotten used* to seeing Billy more often, practically daily, and he's jittering right out of his own skin without their usual brand of *hanging out*.

He wonders if Billy feels the same way. If he misses the junkyard, if he misses Steve, too.

Tossing his pen onto the coffee table, Steve sighs and drags his hands over his face. "This is going nowhere," he mumbles.

He slumps back, against the couch, checking his watch for what feels like the twelfth time in as many minutes, and he thinks briefly of Nancy and her red pen and the original draft of his personal essay from back in October. He thinks, maybe, he should call her. See if she'd be willing to help; she's always been so much smarter than him. He checks his watch again. It's barely after noon.

Groaning, he shoves off the couch and pads across the carpet until he gets to the kitchen, the tile cool even through his socks, and he putters around-- making a coffee, checking the cabinets, seeing what he may need to stock up on while his parents are away. His mom had done a pretty good job of it; she'd sent Sylvia out to shop for their usual staples, but Steve knows he'll need to go out and get more when they inevitably stay away for longer than expected.

He's weighing a box of penne in his right palm when he remembers a day, around this time last year, when he'd invited Nancy over to study for midterms and he'd made her dinner for the first time. She'd

been so impressed, so surprised, and Steve had been so proud to provide for her while she helped him cram all night for the exams coming their way. Back then, it had been easy to ask for her help--almost expected. He wouldn't have even thought twice before picking up the phone and dialing the Wheeler house.

Now, he stares at it where it hangs in the cradle, lips pursed, pasta box still in hand. He feels stupid. Like he shouldn't *need* the help, but he *wants it* .

He ends up with the phone in his hand, with a dial tone in his ear, before he even realizes what he's doing, fingers pressing in the familiar string of numbers, his weight shifting as it rings. He's about to hang up after the third ring, when the line clicks, and Nancy picks up.

"Hello?"

Steve fumbles. "Uh, Nance, hey. It's Steve."

He hears her laugh and figures she recognized his voice. *"Hi, Steve. What's going on? You okay?"*

"Yeah. Yeah, no, I'm good. I just-- Well, don't get the wrong idea, okay?"

"Steve," she says, and it's all she needs to say for Steve's ears to turn pink.

"Right. Um. Do you, maybe, wanna come over tonight? And help me with a paper? I'm-- I'm kind of struggling, and you're just--"

"I'd be happy to, Steve." And she really does sound like it, like she's happy he's reaching out to her for something so simple. *"I can be there after five. Is that okay? I'm watching Holly while my mom is out, is all--"*

"That's-- Yeah, that's great. Thank you, Nance. And-- and I'll make your favorite-- the stuffed shells, right?" Steve rushes over to the cabinet, digging through to see if he has what he needs, tangling himself in the chord of the phone in the process.

"You don't have to do that, Steve. I'm happy to help you-- with anything."

"I want to," he says, and means it.

Nancy huffs out another laugh, like static, over the phone, and the sweetest warmth spreads through Steve's chest at the sound. "Okay. *Your place after five?"*

"Sounds great," Steve breathes, body sagging, relief kind and soft and sinking into his bones -- that he asked and she said yes, that he could ask in the first place. "Thank you, Nancy. Really."

"Anytime, Steve. See you soon."

She hangs up and the dial tone buzzes in his ear again. It's not nearly as shrill as it was before, and Steve smiles to himself, standing there, tangled in the phone chord, a little bit more weightless than he was five minutes before.

He's at the liquor store, the one at the edges of town where the attendant will look the other way if you slip him an extra ten when you check out, when it happens.

He's standing in front of a selection of wine his mother would beat him over the head for thinking of buying, but he remembers the last time he'd tried to serve Nancy the imported stuff and doesn't want a repeat performance. In both hands he's got a bottle, one white and one red, and he's trying to decide which one will pair best with the pasta dish he's got the ingredients piled in his backseat for when the doorbell chimes at the front of the store.

Steve doesn't pay it much mind, still frowning down at the backs of the labels, not sure if he should go with a Californian brand or not, until he hears the cashier hiss out a curse and the sound of something crashing. Startling, he looks over his shoulder, but he can't see beyond the high stacks of shelves to the front, or to the aisle where the sound came from.

"I already sold you a bottle of whiskey today," he hears the cashier say. "I'm not selling you another."

It's not until he hears it, the distinct half-mad cackle, that Steve really starts to pay attention.

"Oh, c'mon, *Kenny* ." Billy Hargrove's voice echoes down the aisles, bounces around in Steve's head, and he knows he shouldn't, knows he should leave it alone, but he's already setting the wine down and rounding the corner, following the noise. "I'll make it worth your while. Gotta twenny in it for ya."

"Kid, you're *wasted* ." The cashier sighs.

"Nah," Billy says, right as Steve turns down the aisle they're on, seeing the spill of plastic bottles across the linoleum floor. "Close, though."

Steve knows, without having to see Billy's face, that he's grinning wide. Knows, just by his posture, that he's keyed up. That he's just waiting for someone to make a move, to try and lay a hand in him. Knows what'll happen if someone does.

So, he does the stupid thing, and clears his throat-- catching Kenny's eye and Billy's attention. Billy twists slightly, looks over his shoulder, and Steve's mouth presses thin when Billy's grin falters and then goes *wider* . When he spots the bruise on his jaw. When he sees the sweat on his skin.

"That you, Harrington?" he squints, like he can't see him in the garish fluorescent lights above, and Steve grimaces.

"You know this guy?" Kenny asks.

"Yeah," Steve clears his throat again, and then forces his feet into motion, pacing down the aisle to clap a hand onto Billy's shoulder. "Glad I ran into you, actually. Can I talk to you outside?"

Billy's still squinting at him, like he's not sure if he's real, but he says "sure" anyways, and lets Steve lead him away from Kenny and toward the front door with a nod of his head.

When they get outside, it's dark already despite the fact that it's only five. Steve pulls away, frowning.

“Jesus, Billy, did you drive here *drunk* ?” he asks, already hunting for the Camaro in the sparse lot, spotting it parked two spaces down from the Beamer.

“Might’ve,” Billy says when Steve turns to him, brows jumping up when Steve reaches out, digging his hands into Billy’s pockets. “Easy on the goods, Harrington, I’m fragile.”

“ *Please* ,” Steve scoffs, finally finding Billy’s keys and pulling them free-- only for Billy to catch his hands, grip firm, and grin sly.

“Well, if you’re gonna ask me so nice,” he says, and Steve stumbles forward a step when Billy pulls him, eyes wide and lips parted, and his breath catches in his chest as Billy drags him in close, letting go of his hands to grip at his hips.

“Billy--”

He jumps, jolting in his hold as Billy pulls Steve’s hips against his own. He’s half hard, Steve realizes, and chuckling as Steve startles against him. The back of his neck feels hot, his face burns, his throat goes tight.

Billy leans in, drags his nose along Steve’s jaw, breathes deep. He hums, hands sliding around, from Steve’s hips to his ass, and *squeezes*.

Pressing his hands flat to Billy’s chest, Steve arches back and away, mouth twisting up. “Billy, cut it out, this isn’t funny--”

“Waited for you,” Billy mutters, eyes half-lidded and heavy, pupils blown when Steve gets a good look at them, even in the dark outside of the liquor store. “At the junkyard. I waited for you.”

Steve stills, freezes, his hands on Billy’s chest, Billy’s hands creeping up, up, *up* , under the back of his coat, his sweater, his shirt, fingers splaying out over Steve’s skin. “ *What* ?”

“Got into it with my pops,” he tilts his head over, like he’s showing off his new bruise, and Steve’s fingers curl into the fabric of his shirt. “Wanted to blow off some steam. You weren’t there.”

Rage pits in Steve's stomach. Opens up in him, a gaping maw of *cold*, and it floods through his veins in a painful rush.

Shoving at Billy's chest, Steve pushes him stumbling back. Billy's eyes go wide, hands still out like he'd try and reach for him again, but Steve throws his car keys at him and turns away.

“*Fuck* you, Hargrove.”

“What? Steve--”

“Find someone else to *blow off some steam* with, okay? There are plenty of girls willing to play *distraction* for you.” Steve snaps over his shoulder, digging around for his own keys as he heads toward the Beamer. “*Christ*, you're such an asshole.”

“That's not what I--” Billy follows after him, grabs him by the arm. “That's not what I fucking meant. *Jesus*, you never let me fucking finish--”

“Maybe because I don't wanna hear it!” Steve yanks away from his touch. “*Maybe* I don't want to hear you tell me it was a joke or a mistake or--”

“It *wasn't*,” Billy says, and he's about as fired up as Steve is, maybe more -- he was already looking for a fight, after all. “It wasn't a joke. It wasn't a mistake. *It wasn't*.”

“Then what the fuck was it, huh?” Steve pushes at him again, trying to get some space, and Billy's nostrils flare out, his jaw winds tight. “Jesus-- *Fuck*, it doesn't even *matter*, okay?”

“*Right*,” Billy bares his teeth, striding up close, stepping into Steve's space, and even with the inch that Steve has on him he feels like Billy is staring him down. “It doesn't *matter*. It didn't *happen*. Right?”

Steve can see his hands curling, can see his chest heaving, can see the jump of his pulse in his neck. He wonders if Billy's knuckles are itching the same way his are.

He wonders if there are more bruises he can't see.

Right , he wants to say, wants to spit, wants to shove Billy away again because Friday night is still lingering like a bad taste, and he wants Billy's hands back on him almost as badly as he wants to tear into him for being an *asshole* , a *coward* , a *dick* who plays around with people's feelings without thinking twice about it.

Instead, he says: "You're the one that left. Not me."

Billy blinks. His hands uncurl, almost flinch apart as his fingers unwind, and he frowns as Steve steps back. Steps away. Wraps his arms over his chest and looks anywhere but at Billy.

" *You're* the one that walked away, after I--" Steve's voice breaks, and his heart is pounding so fast that he can feel it at the back of his head, and he can't believe he's doing this, opening himself up raw like this, *again*, for Billy Hargrove. "You're the one that left. So, *you* tell *me* . Did it matter?"

When he finally looks back up at Billy, his eyes are wide, and his lips are parted. He's staring at Steve like he's fragile and he's afraid of breaking him and Steve *hates it* .

With a sigh, Steve shakes his head and takes another step back. "I need to get home. Nancy's coming over, and I--"

"No. *No* , goddamn it, Steve, you don't get to ask me something like that and walk away--"

"What? Like you did?" Steve barks out a laugh, and then shakes his head again, arms tightening over his chest. "You're drunk, Billy. Whatever you say right now won't hold salt tomorrow, anyway. None of this will."

Billy surges forward, takes Steve by the shoulders, and it's so quick and so sharp that Steve thinks it's supposed to hurt a little.

It doesn't. Billy's hands are big and gentle and warm on his arms, and he squeezes a little, and looks like he wants to shake Steve-- and maybe he does-- but he's so careful that Steve *quakes* .

"You don't *understand* and I don't know how to *tell you* ," Billy says, and Steve's shoulders draw up, draw tight, and Billy's mouth works

like he can't find the right words. "I fucked up, okay? *I'm fucked up, but--* When I left, I wasn't leaving *you*."

And Steve doesn't know what to say to that. Doesn't know if he believes him. Because it sure felt like that's what Billy was doing. It doesn't make *sense*, and he's opening his mouth to tell Billy just that when a car pulls up and they're blinded by the headlights.

Steve squints, bringing up a hand, and Billy drops his hands away, teeth grinding. Steve doesn't know who's in the car, but he figures they're an asshole if the fact that they still have their high beams on is anything to go by.

Then the driver's side door opens, music comes pouring out, and Steve can just barely make out the short silhouette of Tommy H. and his big ears before the guy even opens his mouth.

"Well, well, Harrington and Hargrove." Tommy grins, killing the engine and stepping out to lean on the top edge of his door, and Billy is growing tenser and tenser by the second; Steve can practically feel him vibrating, even from a couple paces away. "Seems we all had the same idea on this fine, Sunday evening."

Steve glances at Billy, out of the corner of his eyes, sees how tight his jaw is still wound and bites down on the inside of his cheek.

"I'm sorry, I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" Tommy asks, gesturing lazily between them. "You guys look a little tense. Did Billy finally remember what a pussy you are, Harrington?"

"Tommy," Steve's voice drops low with warning, mostly because Billy is starting to smile, starting to coil tight, like he's finally spotted the fight he's been looking for all day. "Not now."

"What? It's a genuine question. Stevie's always running from a fight, Hargrove, you should know that by now." And, really, Steve can't believe the *gall* Tommy has. "He couldn't even hold his own with *Byers*, and that dudes a bigger fag than Steve's ever been--"

Billy's moving before Steve can even blink. He's on Tommy, tearing him away from the side of his car, and landing a punch that *cracks* so

loud Steve can *feel it* .

Something's broken, but Steve's not sure what.

Billy swings again, and Tommy's raising his hands, dazed. Steve knows how that feels, knows how bad his head must be ringing, and there's blood pouring out of Tommy's nose, around his mouth, down his chin.

"Fuck," Steve whispers, then jerks into motion. " *Shit* , Billy, *stop --*"

He tries to get between them, to break them up before they can go too far, but he steps in at the wrong time. Steps between them right as Tommy gets his feet under him enough to take a swing too, and pain explodes along Steve's jaw as he goes down under the force of the hit.

Someone curses. Steve doesn't know who, but he can taste blood in his mouth-- and Nancy is going to *kick his ass* , Jesus.

The truth of it is, Steve's not good at taking a hit. He's found this out the hard way, the last couple of times he's gotten in over his head, and Steve will be the first to admit he doesn't actually *like* fighting or physical confrontation. He's more likely to dodge than strike out, and the first hit always leaves him scrambled.

When he finally gets his feet back under himself, they're still fighting, panting and grappling with one another -- but Billy is obviously winning. Even drunk, he's got more power behind his punch. More finesse. More practice.

There's a flash of red and blue, a shrill *bwoop* of warning, as one of the deputy cars rolls into the lot. Steve spits blood and another curse, pushing himself forward and catching Billy around the middle to haul him off of Tommy before he can do anymore damage. Before he can get caught up and end up accidentally assaulting a police officer in his abandon as a familiar, mustached face steps out and calls out a sharp *hey, break it up!*

"That's enough, Billy." Steve hisses, jerking him back as Billy tries to lurch forward again, and the deputy is catching Tommy by the scruff

and reeling him back too. “That’s *enough* , Billy, *Jesus* .”

“You’re a *fuckin* psycho!” Tommy calls, cradling a hand over his nose and taking a swipe, and the deputy rolls his eyes skyward. “You’re *crazy* , Hargrove--!”

And Billy is laughing, cackling, as he finally slumps back against Steve. There’s blood on his teeth, and he licks it away, eyes burning and bright even in the dark. Steve’s arm tightens around him.

“You got him?” the deputy asks.

“Yeah,” Steve grunts, stumbling under Billy’s weight. “Yeah, I got him.”

“Good,” he says, then yanks Tommy toward the squadcar. “Let’s go, kid.”

And as the deputy piles Tommy into the back of his car, Steve’s feet go out from under him and he slumps down, Billy still held tight to his chest. He plops down against the curb, feels the rise and falls of Billy’s chest under his palm, and wonders just what the hell he’s going to do now.

He ends up sitting there with the deputy jotting down notes, Billy handcuffed next to him, while Steve gives his statement of what happened. Tommy’s slumped in the backseat of the deputy’s car while they wait for another car to come pick up Billy, and Steve’s elbows rest heavy on his knees as he tells the deputy-- *Powell* , his name tag reads-- what led up to the squirmish. That Billy and Tommy had had a confrontation at school earlier that week, nothing physical, and that Tommy had picked the fight, tried to goad the both of them, and Billy had followed through.

Billy is unusually quiet next to him, sitting there hunched over his own knees, spitting blood out of his mouth. He seems to be sobering up some, in the cold, and Steve feels a pang of pity for him.

His bruises must have bruises, now.

When Hopper's truck pulls up, Steve hangs his head. Nancy really is going to kick his ass.

"Steve," Hopper sighs out smoke as he steps down out of the truck, idling up to Powell's side. "Do I want to know?"

"Not my fault, Chief." Steve says, holding his hands up. "Not this time."

"But, once again, I find you in the middle of something you shouldn't be." Hopper says, but he's trying not to smile. "Deputy Powell, here, radioed and said you helped break up the fight?"

"Tried to," Steve bobs his head, tonguing the split in his lip. "Wasn't really all that successful."

"Well, no one's dead." Hopper says. "That's something."

Steve huffs out a laugh, and it nearly catches in his throat like a sob. His hands are shaking a little, from the adrenaline and from the dizzying reminder that things could be a lot worse.

Next to him, Billy shifts, looks at him, and his fingers flex behind his back. Steve wets his lips and looks away. Doesn't want to know what Billy's face might look like right now, or what Billy might see on Steve's face if their eyes meet.

Hopper sighs again, hands on his hips, and he gestures at Billy. "Alright, kid. Let's get you into the truck. Powell, get the Hinton boy down to the station and write him up. Call his mom. I'm sure she'll be happy to read him the riot act."

Powell nods, once, and turns away. He climbs into the squadcar and pulls out, tires growling over the asphalt.

Billy wobbles awkwardly, unable to quite get to his feet on his own, and Hopper stoops to take him by the arm and pull him up. Steve watches, as Hopper carts him away, and Billy climbs into the back, docile and without any of the fire from before. His eyes are cast down, and when Hopper shuts the door on him, Steve surges up onto his feet.

“Hop!” Steve calls, and Hopper turns to him, brows up. “What--? Um, what exactly are you gonna do with him? Billy, I mean.”

“Write him up, call his parents,” Hopper says. “The usual--”

“You can’t,” Steve says, eyes darting to Billy through the car window, the work of his throat as he tips his head to rest against the back of the seat; he looks resigned, Steve realizes. “You can’t call his parents.”

Hopper squints. “What? Steve--”

“Look, we’ve-- We’ve been through some crazy shit, right?” Steve presses, hands flexing uselessly at his sides. “And when it-- I mean, you’ve not done things by the book everytime, right?”

Hopper folds his arms in front of himself, scowling. “What, exactly, are you getting at, Steve?”

“I’m just-- I’m just asking you, as a friend or-- or a kid that’s helped you deal with some crazy shit, *don’t* call his parents. I’ll pay the fine, if there is one. Write him up. Keep him in the drunk tank for the night. Just *don’t call his parents*, Hop. Please.” Steve says. “*Please*.”

Hopper regards him for a long, quiet moment. Then, to Steve’s relief, he nods.

“Okay. Okay, I won’t call his parents, but Steve?” Hopper’s brows go up, his jaw goes firm, and Steve draws his shoulders back. “We’re gonna talk about this. You got that?”

“Yeah. Yes, that’s-- Thank you, Hop. Really.”

“Don’t mention it. To anyone. Like, at all.”

“I won’t.”

“Good,” Hopper nods. “Now, go home, Steve.”

“Thanks, Chief.”

Hopper nods, waiting while Steve unlocks his car, and he calls out

right before Steve climbs in. “Good job, tonight, Steve. I know a lot of guys, a lot older than you, who wouldn’t step in between two people throwing down. You ever decide you’re interested in doing it professionally, let me know. I could use more people like that on my staff-- even in a slow town like Hawkins.”

Steve blinks at him, at the implication, and he nods dumbly. “I will. Night, Hop.”

“Night, kid.” Hopper says. “See you around.”

And then he’s climbing into the truck, pulling it into drive, and rolling away with Billy in the backseat. Steve stands there for a long while, in the empty lot, before sliding into the driver’s seat of his Beamer to go home.

12. I wish those days could come back once more

Notes for the Chapter:

WHOOOPS! This took a while, didn't it? And y i k e s,
the angst.

My bad?

“We need to talk.”

Steve doesn't jump or startle. Doesn't slam his locker shut. Doesn't do much more than raise an eyebrow in Billy's general direction, meet his gaze briefly where he's leaning and looking like shit but still somehow gorgeous with a bruised chin and jaw and yesterday's clothes, and then look back to the mess of his locker.

The riot act Nancy had read him the night previous is still ringing in his ears-- *if he can't get his shit together, if he drags you into a mess like this again, I'm going to shoot him, do you hear me, Steve?*-- and even though she only knows half of the story, Steve thinks she's a little right. Whatever is going on, whatever happened between them, they need to settle it, figure it out, and move on. Steve has bigger things to worry about, and so does Billy.

Doesn't mean he won't try and avoid it, though.

“You don't say,” Steve drawls, stuffing his coat into his locker; it's unfairly cold out for the end of February, despite the sunshine and the clear skies, and Steve is starting to ache for spring. “How was the drunk tank?”

“Harrington,” Billy's voice dips, and he's leaning, propped up on an arm, draping himself into Steve's space.

Steve snaps his locker shut, rests back against it, arms folded in front of himself. “Did you know you broke Tommy's nose? In two places? I'm not saying the guy didn't deserve it, but he wasn't even insulting you, yet--”

“ *Steve* ,” Billy's eyes drop shut, his jaw ticking, like he's trying not to

wince.

“What? You said we needed to talk, I’m talking--”

“Not about last night--”

“Really? A lot of *stuff* happened last night, I’d hate to skim over it and miss any important *details* --”

“Steve,” Billy snaps, lips pressing thin, fingers flexing over the metal of the lockers-- and Steve’s impressed, really, because if he were as hungover and pissed off as Billy looks, he would’ve already swung. “*Please* .”

“You need to talk to someone, Billy.” Steve says, shoving off his locker, moving to brush by. “I’m just not sure it’s me.”

He moves, to go, to leave, because it’s true. What they’ve been doing is helping, but it’s a bandaid on a grease fire; it isn’t solving anything-- just keeping them both from snapping for a while longer. *Obviously, it isn’t doing a good enough job of that either* , Nancy had said. Steve’s inclined to agree after seeing that drunk, desperate look on Billy’s face fade into something mindless and hungry for pain.

He’s rounding Billy to head down the hall, to head to class, but Billy catches him. His hand is firm but not unyielding at Steve’s elbow. He’s shaking a little.

“Don’t make me beg, Steve.” He says, voice low and rough. “I have some things I need to say, and I need you to hear them.”

And Steve-- Steve isn’t sure if he *wants* to hear whatever Billy has to say, but he knows he *needs* to. Knows that he’s already had a total of two nightmares featuring Billy’s face opening up into a million razor sharp teeth, and he’s not sure how many of those he can stomach. Knows that he’s been aching and raw since Friday just at the *thought* of Billy Hargrove’s mouth on his, and if Billy’s offering some kind of absolution or answers for this pain, Steve would be stupid not to fall to his knees and take it for what it is: closure.

So his jaw clenches tight, back teeth grinding, and he swallows down the tinny, instinctual *no* . Breathing out slow, Steve nods, and meets

Billy's eyes.

"Fine. You wanna talk?" Steve reaches out, fists a hand into Billy's shirt, and *pulls* . "Let's go talk."

The bathroom is empty when they step in. Steve checks all of the stalls anyway.

Hovering by the door, Billy shifts his weight between his feet, looking like he wants to be anywhere but there-- even though it was *definitely* his idea in the first place. Steve turns to him, from the other end of the room, and holds his hands out before planting them on his hips.

"Well?"

"I'm sorry," Billy breathes.

Steve tosses his hands up, chest feeling tight and hot and too small for this conversation. "Tell me something I *haven't heard* already."

"I know you talked to the Chief. I don't know what you said, but I know he didn't call my dad because of it." Billy says. "Thank you."

Deflating a bit, Steve nods. "You're welcome. I didn't-- I didn't tell him why, but he agreed on the basis that I would. Just so you're aware."

"That's fair," Billy nods, sniffing, and shoving his hands into his back pockets, his gaze straying down. "What'll you tell him when he asks?"

"The truth. That he hits you."

"Won't be able to do anything about it," Billy scoffs.

"Maybe. But Hop's good people." Steve crosses his arms, leaning back against the cool tile of the wall, already tired and they've barely begun. "He'll be good to have in your ring. And maybe he'll be able to point you in the right direction."

Billy frowns. "What do you mean?"

"Obviously, I'm not much of a help." Steve says, shrugging a bit and pressing his lips thin. "The junkyard was always more for me than for you, wasn't it? Maybe Hop can help you work your shit out, he's helped me a bit with mine. And from what I understand, he can relate. His dad was a prick, too."

Squinting, Billy cant his head at Steve and takes an aborted step forward. "Are you--? Are you telling me to talk to a fucking shrink?"

"I dunno," Steve shrugs again, a bit more helplessly. "Maybe? Whatever we're doing isn't good enough, if you're still going off the rails like--"

Billy laughs, short and sharp and brittle. "You're serious, right now? I need to talk to someone?"

"I'm not saying I'm the picture perfect model of mental health--"

"Steve," Billy snaps, nostrils flaring out, and his jaw works as Steve's mouth clicks shut, head tilting forward dangerously. " *Not* what I meant when I said we need to talk."

His gut reaction is to shrug and look away. To deny it again, like he had on the sidewalk on Saturday. To say: *what else is there to talk about ?*

He doesn't.

Sucking in a short, shuddering breath, he nods and drops his hands to his sides. His fingers flex, useless, like he's bracing for a hit-- and it kind of feels like he is.

Billy eyes him. "I wanna talk about Friday."

"Fine," Steve sighs. "Let's talk about Friday. You said you had some stuff to say, so say it."

"Why did you show up at the theatre?"

"That's not a statement."

“Just answer the damn question, Harrington.”

“Well, why did you hold my hand?” Steve shoots back, and Billy grimaces, but his eyes are fever bright, just like Friday night-- like Steve is five seconds from running and Billy is six from chasing him.

“Because I wanted to,” Billy says, wetting his lips, taking a step forward. “Because I still want to. Because I like the way your hand feels in mine. Why did you show up at the theatre, Steve?”

Steve’s heart is unsteady, loud, in his heavy chest. “Because-- Because I knew you were going to be there, and I wanted to see you, and-- and...”

“And?” Billy steps closer, and Steve already feels claustrophobic, pressed to the wall, with half the room between them waiting for Billy to swallow it up.

“And I was jealous.” Steve says, throat working. “I didn’t know I was, that I went because I was, but I-- I was. Jealous. Why’d you accept a date if you were just gonna scare her off?”

“Didn’t think you’d show,” Billy admits. “Didn’t think you’d ever-- God, but you do, don’t you?”

“I don’t--” Steve shakes his head, curls his arms around himself, chewing on the inside of his cheek. “I don’t, ahh-- I don’t know what you--”

“You do,” Billy nods, closes the last few paces between them, presses a hand to the wall by Steve’s head and leans in. “You wouldn’t’ve kissed me if you didn’t.”

“If I didn’t what?” Steve asks, head tipping back a bit, and Billy’s eyes dart down to his bared throat.

“If you didn’t want me,” Billy says. “You wouldn’t’ve kissed me if you didn’t want me.”

He’s leaning in, like he might try again. Like he wants to. His eyes skirt back up, to Steve’s mouth, and his brows pinch at the split in his lip and the faint bruising around it.

He reaches up, touches Steve's chin, catches it with his fingers, and brushes his thumb against the tender skin. Steve flinches, almost hisses, but doesn't pull away.

"Tommy do that?" he asks.

Steve's throat works. "You haven't told me-- You haven't told me why you left."

Billy's eyes jump to his, and he freezes. Steve can see the tension ripple through him, the way it starts at his mouth with the way his lips press thin, and then travels down to his jaw, to his neck, to his shoulders. He drops his hand from Steve's chin, pushes off the wall, takes a step back. Looks away.

Steve's chest goes tight, too small and too heavy, for his breath. Billy won't meet his eyes.

"Why did you leave?" He asks, hands curling up at his sides, and Billy rubs a hand over his own face. "Billy, why did you leave--?"

"I don't know how to explain it, okay?" Billy snaps, face a bit pink, throwing his hands out.

Steve frowns, searching over his face, over the agitated lines of his body. "Well, fucking *try* ."

Billy licks his lips, huffing out a short, irritated laugh, staring at Steve like he's shocked Steve has the gall to demand an explanation. "What do you want me to say?"

"The *truth* would be fucking nice," Steve scoffs out an incredulous laugh, and something in his chest twists loose, gives way to the anger and hurt from the weekend. "How about that? I don't-- I don't just go around *kissing guys* , Billy, but I definitely kissed you, and then you *definitely* kissed me."

Billy's jaw winds tight, and he looks off to the side, nostrils flaring and fists curling, and Steve very nearly laughs again.

"What was your plan here?" Steve asks, stepping forward, pulling himself to his full height-- and it isn't much, but it gives him some

peace of mind, to look down at Billy. “See if I can fess up, maybe get in a makeout session in the boy’s bathroom, and then run off again?”

“ No ,” Billy snaps, and when he meets Steve’s eyes, the blue of his irises is burning.

“Then, *what* ?” Steve’s palms are itching-- to reach out, to push Billy, to shake him, *something* . “What *game* are you playing, here?”

“I’m *not* ,” Billy snaps, baring his teeth.

“Then *why* did you leave--?”

“ *I was scared* ,” Billy says, practically shouts, and his hands are balled up like he might lay into Steve, and Steve’s eyes are wide. “I was scared, okay? I got spooked and ran off before I could think twice.”

It kicks the fight right out of Steve. He blinks, like he’s been struck, and stares at Billy’s wide, earnest eyes.

“What?” he asks on a breath.

Billy tongues at the corner of his mouth, shaking his head, and his grin is unpleasant and tight on his face. “Don’t make me repeat myself, Harrington.”

“What were you scared of?” Steve asks-- because he’s familiar with fear, with what it can do, with how irrationally your body will react-- but he needs to know *why* Billy was afraid. Why he looks afraid, now. “Was it-- I mean, was it me? Something I did, or-- or *said* ? Is it the fact that we’re both guys? I mean, what--?”

“All of it,” Billy says in a rush, then hisses out a breath and steps back. “And-- and none of it.”

“That--” Steve huffs out a sharp sound and closes his eyes, head shaking, almost brings his hands up to rub over his face, to pull at his own hair, to do something with them to keep from going crazy. “That doesn’t make any *sense* , Billy--”

“I can’t explain it--”

“ *Try* ,” Steve says; begs. “Try to explain it because-- because I don’t know what to do, here, unless you do.”

Billy stares at him, jaw working, fingers curling and uncurling at his sides. He doesn’t answer. Doesn’t even try.

“I don’t know what to do, Billy.” Steve holds out his hands, shoulders coming up, voice soft and maybe a bit desperate. “But I can’t-- I can’t handle the bullshit. I can’t go back and forth with you like this. And that’s on me, but I *can’t* , okay? I can’t.”

“I--” Billy’s throat works as he swallows, and he looks at Steve with such *yearning* that it makes Steve ache. “I’m sorry.”

And Steve knows he means *I can’t* or *I won’t* or *I don’t know how* . Knows that this is it. This is all he’ll get.

“I know.” Steve says, and his smile is weak but genuine. “I know, and it’s-- it’s okay. I don’t *hate* you , or anything, Billy. I’m just... not gonna set myself up for something that’s just gonna hurt.”

I’m not going to set myself up for more failure , he doesn’t say. *For more heartbreak* .

He’s had enough of that.

Billy swallows and looks down, looks away, bobbing his head. He tucks his hands into his pockets, but not before Steve can see the tremble of his fingers.

Ducking his head, he catches Billy’s eyes. “This doesn’t change anything for me. You’re still-- I mean, you’re still my friend. I still want to go to the junkyard and smash shit up with you, and make fun of the shitheads, and call you out on your shitty jokes.”

That earns him a bit of a laugh, and something goes easy in both of their shoulders.

“You’re still welcome at my house. Anytime you need it, you’re welcome.” Steve says.

Billy’s head bobs again, and he doesn’t say anything, like maybe he

doesn't trust himself to.

"We good?" Steve asks, because he's really not sure if they are, but Billy is already nodding again.

"Yeah," he says, and it's rough and not quite right, but Steve will take it. "Yeah, Harrington, we're good."

Yeah, Steve will definitely take it.

Things after that aren't exactly easy, but they aren't horrible either.

He still has to go to class. Still has to walk the halls. Still has to suffer through a pop quiz in history. Still has to sit next to Billy in English. Still has to drop his paper off with Ms. Klein-- *I'll read through what you have this weekend, and we'll discuss it next Monday* -- and still has to go to lunch, where Nancy and Jonathan are, with Billy in tow.

That first day is the hardest.

After talking with Billy in the bathroom, it had felt odd. Like the entire day was a puzzle piece jammed in where it shouldn't be-- out of place. Like he shouldn't be in class at all. Like he should be at home trying to pretend he *didn't* still want Billy's mouth on his. Or pretend Nancy's eyebrows aren't judging him from across the library table as Billy sidles up next to Steve.

"So," she says, with a purse of her lips, smile tight and unkind when she gives it. "How was everyone's weekend? Billy?"

Steve sighs. "Nance--"

"You look a little rough," she plows right on. "Did something happen?"

"Jesus, this small ass town." Billy grunts, looks twitchy, like he wants a cigarette-- and Steve doesn't blame him. "Got into a scrap. But I think you already know about that."

Her eyes dart pointedly to Steve. "I think I do."

"Yeah," Billy says, but doesn't take his eyes off of her. "Anything else you *think* you know?"

"I know that you're an asshole, that this whole *tough guy* act you've got going on is more trouble than it's worth, and that if you get Steve, or any of my friends, *hurt* again while *being* an asshole? I'll take the Chief's rifle and shoot you in the foot."

"*Nancy*," Steve balks, but she's already unwrapping her lunch and sliding part of it across the table toward Billy.

Jonathan is trying not to laugh.

Billy *does* laugh. Plucks up the half a PB&J she gives him and takes a bite.

"I can see why you were so strung up on her, Harrington." Billy says, around a mouthful, and when Steve looks at him, his eyes are bright, brighter, and his shoulders are easy. "She's a fuckin' hellion."

Nancy shrugs a shoulder, prim as ever. Jonathan is shaking, hand over his mouth.

"Just as long as we're on the same page," she says.

"Yeah," Billy smiles. "We're on the same page."

After that, things get a little easier.

Steve doesn't see much of Billy, for the rest of the day, but he finds him outside in the parking lot after the final bell rings. Steve doesn't think much of it, beyond the sight of Billy marching toward the Camaro, and it strikes him suddenly that he doesn't know how Billy got it back, if it was Hopper who took him or someone else, or if Billy should be going home to the man that gave him that purple bruise on his jaw.

He's calling out before he can stop himself, walking a little faster,

mouth twisting up when Billy blinks over at him from the driver's side of the Camaro. His shoulders are tight, Steve realizes, as he comes to a slow stop, and he isn't sure what Billy is expecting from him to make him look like that, but it makes something pinch beneath his ribcage to know he put that tension there.

"Harrington," he says, and Steve tugs at the strap of his backpack.

"Hey," he breathes, shifting from foot to foot. "Um. I just-- You don't need to come over to my place tonight, do you?"

Billy's brow ticks up, and he kicks back to lean against the driver's side door, arms crossing over his chest, smile plastic. "Why? You got plans?"

"No, that's not-- No." Steve frowns, lips pursing, and he sighs and agitates a hand through his hair as he glares down at his own ratty sneakers. "I just know you didn't go home last night. And I know you got into it with your dad yesterday over something. And I don't want you to have to go back there if you're going to get hurt."

There's a long, heavy pause. When Steve finally looks back up, Billy's face is twisted in shock and something softer.

"Jesus, Steve." He says, something fond in it, shaking his head. "You're way too fucking nice, you know that?"

Steve blinks.

"I'll be fine," Billy says, assures, pulls out his cigarettes and lights one up. "Chief let me go early enough that I got home in time to take Max to school. Barely even noticed I was gone. Long as I don't open my mouth, it'll be fine."

Steve wets his lips. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure," he grins, and it's sweeter somehow. Softer. "Thanks, though."

"Yeah. Yeah, no problem." Steve bobs his head, takes an aborted step back. "See you tomorrow?"

“Yeah,” Billy breathes out smoke. “See you tomorrow, Harrington.”

Steve is not expecting Jenny to plop herself down on his desk again once English class rolls around on Friday morning. He's not expecting it, but he's also not exactly surprised by it.

The week has gone by better, more smoothly, than he could have ever expected. Ever hoped. He still feels a punch of longing anytime he sees Billy, still feels a little unsure around him, but Billy still gives him just as much hell as before. Still needles and teases, even if it's with a bit of hesitant reserve in his eyes, and Steve gives as good as he gets.

There's a cautious space between them now. Like there are new lines drawn that weren't there before. Steve hadn't realized how *much* Billy actually put hands on him until he stopped doing it. Steve hadn't realized how much he liked Billy's hands on him until he didn't have it.

But they manage. Dancing around each other, falling back into a new, stilted kind of sync. Finding new lines and avoiding the others.

It feels like, maybe, everything might work out. Like, maybe, things could be okay. Even if Steve longs, at least a little, for a time before knowing how much he wanted Billy Hargrove.

Still, he feels stiff and awkward as he smiles up at Jenny's beaming face, at her pink bubble gum as she pops it between her lips, but if she notices, she doesn't comment on it. Billy is watching, leaned back in his seat, like he needs some popcorn for the show.

“Alright, Steve Harrington, I believe you have a debt to repay.”

Steve's throat works. “I do?”

“For Saturday? At the diner?” Jenny's brow arches, and Steve sees Billy's do the same out of the corner of his eye. “The Spring Fling?”

“Right,” Steve shakes his head, fingers drumming against his own thigh. “The-- Right, the Spring Fling. That's... a thing.”

“You forgot, didn’t you?” she asks.

No , Steve wants to say. “Well, a lot’s been going on--”

“Damn, Harrington.” Billy cuts in, leans over a bit, and when Steve looks at him, he’s got one of those sharp, mean smiles on. “Do you really have so many chicks chasing your ass that you forgot about agreeing to a date with *this* gorgeous little thing?”

Jenny’s cheeks burn, and she pops another bubble. “He’s helping with the *set-up* . Steve’s *not* my date. Yet. Right, Stevie?”

Steve’s ears go hot, and Billy’s eyes are on him, on the side of his face, as Steve clears his throat and musters up another tight lipped smile. “Right. So. Set-up? Is that happening... soon, or something?”

“Well, not really.” Jenny shakes her head. “We’re still a couple weeks away from prepping the gym. But we’re having a little get together, at my place tonight, to discuss themes. Really, it’s just an excuse to party while my parents are out on *date night* .”

“A party, huh?” Billy asks, and Jenny’s lips purse up.

“Don’t you have, like, someone else’s business to mind?” Jenny asks.

“Sorry, sweetheart.” Billy shrugs. “Where Harrington goes, I follow. Otherwise, I miss out on all the fun.”

“Whatever,” Jenny says, then turns her smile back on Steve. “So, tonight? My place?”

She doesn’t give Steve a chance to reply. She plucks up his pen, jots down her address in Steve’s notebook with a time underneath, and then hops off his desk with a wink.

“See you later, Steve.”

When she’s filed back to her seat, Steve turns a dirty look on Billy, whose grin is tight around the eyes. “So,” he says. “Party tonight, huh?”

"I'm not going," Steve says.

"You gonna tell her that?" Billy gestures toward the back row with a thumb, and Steve looks away. "She seems pretty insistent."

"It's nothing," Steve says, doesn't know why he's saying it, why he feels like he needs to defend his interactions with her at all. "She just thinks I need help getting over Nancy."

"Do you?" Billy asks.

Steve meets his eyes. "No."

Billy stares at him, fingers curling and uncurling where his hands are hanging, propped with one arm along the back of his chair and the other draped over his desk. He licks his lower lip into his mouth, worries it, and bounces a knee.

He looks like he's trying to restrain himself. From what, Steve isn't sure, but then Billy is looking away, nodding his head, and his jaw is tight.

"We should go to the party," Billy says. "Crash it for a couple hours, at least. Let loose."

"Why?" Steve frowns.

Billy snorts. "What else is there to do on a Friday night in Hawkins?"

"Barring an apocalypse? I can think of at least five things."

"We're going to the party, Harrington."

Steve goes to protest, opens his mouth and everything, but Ms. Klein is clearing her throat for class to start, so Steve sinks down in his chair. He waits for her to run through her spiel and then leans over a bit, hissing.

" *Why* ?"

Billy's flexes, and his voice is equally as low when he replies, eyes forward. "Cuz I want to."

"Then go," Steve whispers. "I'm not stopping you. But why do I have to--?"

"Because I want you to be there," Billy says, and Steve falters, blinking, because Billy's throat is working and his knee is bouncing .

"Cuz I think we should go to a party. You and me. Could be fun."

"Fun," Steve repeats, a bit dumb, still staring at the side of Billy's face, and he can't explain the sudden lurch in his chest and he doesn't know if it's good or bad, but he's nodding anyways. "Okay. Sure. For a couple of hours, or something. Until it gets boring."

"Exactly," Billy nods. "Until it gets boring."

And with that settled, Steve turns to face forward. Tries to focus on what Ms. Klein is writing on the board. Tries and fails.

Because, tonight, he's going to a party with Billy Hargrove. And, for some reason, it feels like he's just agreed to a date.

"It's not a date," Steve tells himself, running his fingers through his hair, making sure it has just the right amount of volume. "We're just friends."

"It's not a date," Steve tells himself, after stripping off the third shirt he's tried on, none of them looking right or fitting right or feeling right. "It's just Billy."

"It's not a date," Steve tells himself, hand on the doorknob, feeling like he might vibrate right out of himself knowing exactly who is waiting for him on the other side. "It *can't* be a date."

When he opens his front door, Billy is standing there in his leather jacket, hands tucked into his pockets, looking off to the side like the picture perfect pose of casual. Bruises and all. The complete opposite of the churning going on in Steve's stomach.

Billy blinks when the door opens, like he's just remembering where he is, and smiles. His eyes drag down, over Steve's jeans and the black cotton of his shirt and the bomber jacket bunched up between

his hands, and he raises a brow that makes Steve feel that itching need to go change. Again.

“You ready?”

Steve glances down at himself. “Do I not look ready?”

“You look fine,” Billy says with a roll of his eyes. “Let's go get shit faced, Harrington.”

The drive in Billy's Camaro is a short one. Hawkins is small and Jenny doesn't live that far from Steve. It's maybe two miles. Steve could've walked it.

Sitting in the passenger seat, Foreigner blasting from Billy's radio, he thinks maybe he should have.

Billy's got one of those shirts on -- the ones he refuses to button up properly -- and Steve's palms tingle in remembrance of what it was like to touch that skin. He's singing along as they turn up the drive to Jenny's, head bobbing along, and Steve wishes he could join him, but he can't help but feel twisted up and knotted and turned over.

“ *I'm hot blooded, check it and see.*” Billy croons. “ *I've got a fever burning inside of me* -- c'mon, Jesus, Harrington, loosen up.”

“I'm fine,” Steve insists as they pull up to the curb beside half a dozen other cars.

When he kills the engine, Steve can hear the music pouring out from the house. Steve closes his eyes.

It's David Bowie.

“ *Hey* ,” Billy says, and Steve jerks slightly, throat working as he looks at him. “You good?”

“I'm *fine* ,” Steve says again, unbuckling and going for the door.

A hand stops him. Steve bites down on his cheek to keep from shuddering.

“Hey,” Billy says, softer this time, and Steve doesn't have to look to know he's twisted in the driver's seat to face him. “If you're worried about freaking out again, we can go --”

Steve laughs. Laughs because *of course* that's what's happening -- what Billy thinks is happening -- because the last party Steve went to he lost his mind. Because Billy found him panicking upstairs. Because Steve is a basket case and this *isn't a date* .

“I'm fine,” Steve says, looks at him, and finds Billy frowning. “Just a little fun, right? So, let's go have some fun.”

He pulls from Billy's grip, opens the door, and steps out of the car. Steps out of the car and right into a bad fucking idea.

Jenny is overjoyed that Steve shows up. The party is in full swing when they get there. It's nothing big, but the house is packed anyway. Most of the cheerleading squad is there, with their dates, and a few others from the student council. Steve loses sight of Billy within the first ten minutes. The music is loud, and Jenny is quick about getting a drink into Steve's hands.

“Thanks,” he shouts over the sound, each time a red solo cup gets pressed to his palm.

He's tipsy in no time with whatever mix he keeps downing. Drinks it back fast because it's cold and the house is hot and Steve is hot.

Jenny asks him to dance once, and when he spots Billy on the living room floor with his hands tucked into the back pockets of some girl's jeans, he declines and she doesn't ask again. Instead, she leads him away from the noise and into the more quiet kitchen, where a few people have taken to sitting on the counters, trying to flip playing cards into half-full drink cups left long abandoned.

“There's not a whole lot of dance planning going on, is there?” Steve asks, draining the last of his cup.

Jenny shrugs. “Like I said, it's really just an excuse for a party. Are you having fun?”

“Yeah,” he shrugs, and Jenny purses her lips. “What?”

“You just look like this is the last place on earth you wanna be,” she says. “You didn’t have to come if you didn’t want to, Steve. I just thought -- well, I figured maybe it’d be good? You know, you’re always hanging around with Nancy and Byers.”

Steve’s throat works. “It’s not what you think.”

“Either way,” Jenny pulls herself up onto the counter, crossing her legs at the knee, and Steve is so dumb not to be into this girl. “I think you need to spread your wings a bit. You used to be, like, the life of every party. Loosen up, you know?”

Jesus, Harrington, loosen up , echoes in Steve’s head. *It’s not a date* , skips like a scratched record.

Billy is nowhere in sight, and still Steve can’t get his mind off him. Knows this was his decision anyway.

Because Billy won’t meet him halfway. And Steve can either live with that-- or get over it.

“Yeah. Yeah, no, you’re right.” Steve bobs his head, leaning his hip against the counter next to her legs. “What did you have in mind?”

Jenny grins.

Suck and Blow is a time honored tradition at house parties like this. Steve still remembers the first time he played, fourteen and all long limbs he was still growing into, and how awful he’d been at it.

He’s not much better now.

It’s a simple game, really. You place a playing card against your lips and *suck* , while passing it on to the next person in the line. When the card is pressed between your mouth and someone else’s, they suck and you *blow* , passing the card along down the row. Hence: Suck and Blow.

More than a bit tipsy and a little sloppy, lower lip still tender from Sunday, Steve has miscalculated when to stop *sucking* and when to start *blowing* a couple of times. It's lead to at least one awkward nose bump with Jerry from the football team and two clumsy, over-enthusiastic kisses from a sophomore named Kelsey.

They keep rotating around. When you lose, you step down to the end of the line. In the semi-circle they have around the kitchen island, Steve is three people in, with Jenny to his left, and he's laughing as someone's boyfriend gets smacked for kissing someone else's girlfriend before the card gets picked up again and passed along.

He's relaxed against the counter, half-empty drink in hand, when it finally makes it back to him. He catches the card from a girl he recognizes from his Chem class junior year, and then twists to pass it to Jenny right as the kitchen door swings open and Billy Hargrove comes swaggering in with a girl under each arm.

He falters. He can't help but falter, not with Billy smiling like that, not when Billy catches sight of him leaning down toward Jenny, and the card slips in the last second that Steve forgets to breathe.

His lips slant, a little open, over Jenny's. She's laughing against his mouth as it happens, and she reaches up to tangle her fingers into the hair at the back of his head, pressing up onto her toes and drawing away with a wet *smack* .

"I always knew you'd be a good kisser," she says, eyes bright and teasing, but Steve's heart is pounding in his chest too hard to muster up more than a tight smile. "Though, I think your delivery needs a bit of work."

The room bursts into laughter. Steve's ears are burning.

He doesn't look at Billy.

"To be fair," Steve clears his throat. "I wasn't expecting it."

Jenny's lifts her brow. "You saying you can do better?"

"Kiss her, Harrington!" Jerry calls, over a few *whoops* and scattered laughs.

Steve doesn't look at Billy.

"I am," Steve says, throat tight. "Want proof?"

"I'm game if you are," Jenny grins, her lipstick slightly smeared, but she's lovely anyway. "Pucker up, *Stevie*."

She catches him by the shirt collar, drags him down, and his hands flutter to her waist. Even a bit more toward the drunk side of sober, Steve knows how to tilt his head, how to catch her lower lip between his own. He knows how to make it sweet, make it *good*, and he does. Just to prove that he still can.

It's a little heady. Her mouth is soft under his and tastes sweet. Like whatever she's been drinking and the bubble gum she's always chewing.

When he finally pulls back, she blinking up at him, a bit dazed.

"Damn," she says, to the sound of a few cheers, a few laughs, a few clapping hands.

She's beautiful and Steve wants to want her. Wants to want to kiss her again.

But when he looks up, Billy is gone.

He untangles himself carefully from Jenny, smile a bit lopsided and a bit tight. She blinks up at him a few more times, and then beams wide, bouncing up onto her toes to kiss his cheek.

"Official stamp of approval," Jenny crows, one hand raised. "Steve Harrington, panty dropper!"

They raise their drinks, the little gathering in the kitchen, and Steve feels like his whole face is on fire. He laughs as Jerry slaps him on the back, a little nervous bark of a thing, and clears his throat past the thickness there. Past the tightness winding up in his chest.

His fingers flex at his sides, and the game continues. Steve steps back, excuses himself for some air; Jenny waves him off with a smile.

When he steps outside, he isn't expecting to find Billy out there with a cigarette in his mouth, but he's not exactly surprised by it either. He shuffles over to him, where he's half-hidden under the awning, and offers a tentative grin when Billy looks his way.

"Hey," he says, leaning his shoulder against the brick. "Having fun?"

He regrets it almost immediately.

"I could ask you the same question," Billy grunts, flicking the bit of ash away from the lit end, his other hand stuffed into the pocket of his jacket. "But I think I can figure it out for myself. You look like you've been having lots of *fun*."

Steve thinks, for a moment, that he's supposed to feel guilty. For playing a game, for *loosening up*, but instead all he feels is something blistering and churning and angry scalding its way along his ribcage.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asks, but he knows.

Knows in the way Billy isn't looking at him. In the way his leg is bouncing. In the way it looks like he wants to break something.

Billy glances at him from the corner of his eye. "You've got lipstick on you."

"Your point?" Steve asks, watches as Billy drags on the end of his cigarette, and steps closer. "Give me one of those."

Billy's brow arches, and he breathes smoke into Steve's face. "Sorry, Harrington. This is my last one."

He moves without thinking. Reaches out and grabs Billy's wrist. Plucks the cigarette from the pinch of Billy's fingers and brings it to his own mouth. Drags hard and lets it burn on the way down.

It's a stupid, half-drunk decision. It's a bad fucking idea.

Billy watches him, his wrist still caught in Steve's hand, his chest rising and falling heavy from beneath the open vee of his shirt. His brows pinch over his eyes as Steve breathes out slow, as Steve mutters around the butt of the cigarette between his lips when he

goes to pull another long drag.

“Learn to share,” Steve says.

Billy’s lip curls up into a sneer. “I don’t *share* .”

Then, he catches Steve by the front of his shirt and *yanks* him forward. Catches Steve’s mouth with his own, licks past his teeth, and kisses the smoke from his lips.

Steve’s hands spasm. He drops the cigarette, forgotten, to the concrete beneath their feet. His head is already swimming by the time Billy’s shuffled them around, shoved Steve up against the brick, and pressed in flush all along Steve’s front.

A tingling starts at his nape and then explodes all along the back of his skull, and Steve *groans* . His hands go to Billy’s waist, flutter like bird wings, and then dig in to the soft material of Billy’s shirt, tugging. It’s slick and wet and everything that their first kiss at the junkyard was but also *more* .

More because Steve has craved this, the taste of Billy and cigarette smoke, in his mouth all week. *More* because Steve thought he couldn’t have this. *More* because Steve knows that Billy wants him too.

Billy kisses him like he’s trying to crawl into his skin. Like he’s greedy for it. Like he’s *needy* for it. Clutching Steve close and pressing in hard.

He’s shaking when he finally pulls back.

“Fuck,” Billy hisses, his eyes wide, probably as wide as Steve’s, before he ducks his head a bit to press his face against the heat of Steve’s neck, hiding his words there. “ *Fuck* , Steve, *I can’t* --”

“ *Don’t* ,” Steve rasps, because *he can’t take it* , not again, his throat going tight and his eyes burning and his heart lurching in his chest. “Don’t, *please* , don’t you *dare*-- ”

“I can’t pretend, Steve.” Billy says, voice steady and hard, his finger unwinding from Steve’s shirt and sliding around to Steve’s back, his

lips pressing the words into the skin at the juncture between Steve's throat and his shoulder. "I can't just be friends. I can't *not want you* . I can't."

"You don't-- You don't have to," Steve shakes his head. "You don't have to, you just-- I just need to *know* ."

I just need to know you won't walk away. I just need to know why you walked away in the first place. I just need to know what scared you .

Carefully, reluctantly, Billy pulls back to meet his eyes, mouth set in a thin line. "I can't do that either."

Steve can hear his own pulse in his ears. His breath stutters out of him, and by the time he realizes what's happening, Billy is already pulling away.

"No--"

"I'm gonna figure out how to tell you," Billy says, and Steve goes still, goes quiet, swallows his own words like a bitter pill. "I'm gonna-- I'm gonna figure it out, and when I do-- Well. Until then, I just-- I'm not gonna make you wait around for something that might never come."

"Billy," Steve says, dumb, like he's been struck. Like Billy's just smashed a plate over his head again. This somehow feels worse. "Please. I don't-- It doesn't matter. I swear, I don't-- I don't care, it's okay, *I don't care* ."

Screw failure. Screw heartache. I don't care.

"No," Billy reaches up, frames Steve's face between his palms, and Steve can't help but press into that touch. "No, you *do* and that's-- You deserve better."

Steve tries, desperately, not to hear *you deserve better than me* .

"You deserve the truth. Not a bunch of bullshit. You deserve better than that. Okay?"

Steve's face pinches up, and he bites down on the inside of his cheek,

but he's already nodding, already swallowing past the *frustration* and the *yearning* balling up in his throat-- because this isn't just his decision. Even if he thinks it isn't true.

"You, too. You deserve better, too." Steve says and hates the way Billy's expression crumbles in on itself. "What now?"

Billy's eyes hunt over Steve's face. Burning and bright and *so blue* .

Then, he leans in, presses a fleeting, chaste kiss to the corner of Steve's mouth, and pulls away. Leaves Steve standing there, slumped against the brick of Jenny's house, and grins as he backs away from him. It looks fake and plastic and Steve *hates it* .

"Guess I'll see you around," Billy says.

Steve knows that doesn't mean *I'll see you at lunch* . Knows that doesn't mean *I'll see you in the hallways* . Knows that doesn't mean *I'll see you in English* . Knows that doesn't mean *I'll see you at the junkyard* . Knows that it means distance and time and *hurt* -- and it steals Steve's breath.

When he's turned away, when he's halfway to the Camaro, Steve finally finds his voice again and calls for him. Billy stops but doesn't face him.

"If you--" Steve wets his lips, takes a step forward after him, and then forces himself to stand still because he'll chase him if he doesn't. "If you need a place to go..."

Billy huffs out a laugh. Steve can see it steam in the air.

"*Fuck* , you're way too nice, Steve." Billy says, and when he looks over his shoulder, his cheek is dimpled and his eyes are wrinkled at the corners. "But thanks."

For a second time, Steve Harrington watches Billy Hargrove walk away from him, and wishes-- *desperately*-- that he didn't have to.

13. I wonder if you know (I wonder if you think about me too)

Notes for the Chapter:

Split this bad boy into two, again. Mostly for tone reasons. You'll see.

Sorry for the long wait! But I think I'm back in the saddle. Ish. <3

"When you first gave me your list," Ms. Klein says, on Monday, just after class. "One of the things you listed as wanting was to be happy."

Steve's throat works. It feels dry, his mouth feels dry, even his skin. Like he's brittle, and one wrong touch could send him crumbling into nothing but dust.

The weekend had dragged. After Friday, after Billy kissed him goodbye, Steve had spent it restless and distracted and unsure. He'd filled his Saturday morning and afternoon with Dustin, having offered to help clean out the back shed for Mrs. H just to keep his hands busy, to keep them from shaking so much that the rest of him shook apart too-- and he knows Dustin had seen but hadn't commented, and that had been enough for Steve. The noise of Dustin talking about whatever he was talking about, most of it going clear over Steve's head, as they worked together had been an anchor in the storm of Steve's head, weighing him into place and holding him close enough to the shore to keep from drowning.

His evening had been spent in his own backyard, feet dangling off the diving board over his pool, a bottle of his dad's best bourbon cradled and unopened in his hands. He'd had his bat resting just behind him, and a lighter in his pocket, as he listened to the kids chatter over the walkie talkies. He'd left the sliding door open, in case someone came by to ring his doorbell, and he tried to convince himself he wasn't waiting for Billy -- but it was a lie. So, he sat there sober, wishing he was drunk, as he stared into the mist of heat rising from the surface of the pool in dreamy wisps, dipping his toes in every once in a while just so that they would prickle to life with feeling, just so the wash of

panic every time he did it would make his heart pound in his chest until he was certain it was still there and that he hadn't given it away without realizing.

It wasn't until well after one in the morning, after the kids had fallen asleep, radio silence deafening in Steve's ears, that he heard the crackle of noise.

"You can rest now, Steve." El had said, whispered, over the static.
"No more monsters tonight. Sleep."

Steve's shoulders had slumped. His fingers had twitched around the neck of a full bottle.

He had known, intrinsically, that she hadn't meant real monsters. That, instead, she meant the ones hanging over his own head, the ones lurking in the shadows of his periphery, the ones he doesn't want to dream about when he's already so close to breaking.

"No more monsters tonight," El had repeated, pleaded, and Steve had believed her.

He'd slept long and hard and too exhausted to dream, face first on the couch.

In the morning, he'd called his mother and told her everything. About Billy, about school, about the nightmares that haunted him. About fear. Talked until his voice was hoarse, until he couldn't anymore, and his mother had listened with a quiet, hushed intensity until the well of Steve's aching heart ran dry.

Then, full of a calm Steve so rarely got to experience, she'd said:

"Stefano, tesoro mio, you are so strong. And I am so proud. And I wish I had all the answers, I wish I could wrap you up and keep you safe from the world, but I can't. Just know that I am here, for you, in any way I can be. And that whatever you decide you need to do to heal your hurt, I will support you, sí?"

Steve's eyes had burned, and he had slumped against the wall next to the phone, clutching it to his ear.

“So, tell me, lovey. What do you need of me?”

Steve had sucked in a shuddering breath. “Come home.”

“I will book a flight tonight.”

She had come, early that morning, long before school would begin. Steve had been curled up in bed when she came in, hair a mess, suitcase left at baggage claim, and when he'd seen her, standing in his bedroom doorway because he *asked her to come*, Steve couldn't help but cry.

She had crawled into bed with him, wrapped him up in her arms, and sang softly, quietly in her mother tongue until he'd fallen asleep.

She'd let him sleep in late, later than he would usually let himself, and had nearly convinced him to stay home for the day. He'd been so tired, down to the marrow and aching with it, that he'd nearly said yes.

But here he is, sitting in front of Ms. Klein, four periods of avoiding hide or hair of Billy Hargrove later -- only to find he didn't have to. That Billy isn't even at school.

Or, at the very least, he wasn't in fourth period.

“Yes,” Steve finally says and Ms. Klein smiles, kind and soft at him, as she lifts up his paper.

“And you think this will make you happy?” she asks.

Steve doesn't know. But he remembers agonizing over that paper, remembers the small, sad smile Nancy gave him when she read it through, and he remembers telling her, when she asked, that he was just being honest.

As honest as he could be, anyway.

“I don't know,” Steve says, shrugging and shifting in his seat. “But I think it's something I need to do. So, I hope so.”

“Well,” Ms. Klein says, leaning back in her chair. “If I'm being

honest, it needs a little editing.”

Steve slumps in his desk.

“But, Steve? This is very good. And I’ve no doubt, if you submit this to the right program? You’ll get in.”

For the first time in days, something light fills Steve’s chest. His jaw works, but he leans forward a bit; hopeful.

“You think so?”

“I know so,” Ms. Klein stands, offering the paper out to him. “Take a look over my suggestions, fix what you need to. But then, I think it’s ready. I think you’re ready.”

Steve doesn’t know if he’d stretch it that far. But it’s nice to hear anyways.

Nancy and Jonathan are waiting for him at their usual table when he finally makes his way to the library. Nancy’s smile is bright when she sees him, but it falters as he slumps into his seat.

Jonathan’s already put an apple in front of the vacant chair next to Steve.

When Steve drags it close, passes it back across the table with a tired flick of his wrist, Jonathan’s brow arches. Steve just offers up a tight, close-lipped smile.

“What happened?” Nancy asks, brows pinching.

“He’s just... not gonna be here, I don’t think.”

“You don’t think?” Jonathan asks.

Nancy’s shoulders draw tight. “What did he do?”

“Nothing,” Steve shakes his head, resting forward on his elbows. “He didn’t do anything, I promise.”

Nancy's eyes dart to the open seat next to Steve. "But he's not coming."

"No," Steve says, even though he knows it's not a question. "I don't-- I don't think he's gonna be joining us for a while. Or... Or at all."

Under the table, Jonathan's boot nudges at Steve's toe. He offers one of those tight, tired smiles again, but drops it quickly after. Too exhausted to hold it for too long.

Across the table, Nancy offers up her hand. Her palm is up, her fingers uncurled toward him, and Steve stares at it. Stares at it, for a long moment, and then lets out a shuddering breath and takes it.

"What happened?" she asks again.

Steve huffs out a trembling laugh. "It's a long story."

She glances over her shoulder, at Jonathan, and they share a look. One of those looks Steve used to kind of hate. He kind of loves it, now. That they can say so many words without saying anything at all.

"We've got the time," Jonathan says, shrugging a shoulder. "If you want. We've got the time."

Steve's eyes narrow. "Are you implying that we ditch fifth and sixth period?"

Nancy snorts, fingers squeezing over Steve's. "As if it'd be the first time. This is important. *You* are important."

Steve's shoulders droop. He swallows, throat working, and bobs his head.

"Please," Steve says, curling his fingers more fully over Nancy's, toeing at the leather of Jonathan's worn boots beneath the table.

They both smile.

"Of course."

They end up at the quarry, sitting on the hood of Steve's Beamer, Jonathan's car left abandoned back in the school parking lot. He tells them everything over a joint Jonathan rolls and passes between the two of them, Nancy politely declining as she tucks her legs up under her and leans back against the windshield as Steve talks and talks and talks.

As he wades his way through the last two months, and then the last few weeks, weed loosening his tongue enough to open up raw. To tell them about the confusion, about the fear that's been hounding him about everything; getting over Nancy, piecing together what he wants of his future, reconciling his guilt from the past, and *Billy*. Billy and everything Billy had maybe become.

When he tells them about the kiss, about David Bowie crooning in the night, he looks down and away. His chest feels hot and he keeps grinding his teeth, but Nancy puts her hand on his knee and Jonathan passes him the last dregs of their joint, and Steve tells them how much he'd *wanted* . How much he still wants. How much he hates that want and the way it makes him want to compromise his own needs just for a piece of Billy. Just for whatever Billy would give him.

And, for a second, he's worried that he'll be met with scorn. That Nancy's mouth will twist up with distaste. That Jonathan's open invitation will be rescinded. That he'll find himself without and floundering, when he's already barely treading water.

But that doesn't happen.

Instead, Nancy squeezes at Steve's knee and waits. Waits until he looks up, hands shaking and eyes a bit wide, to see that soft, heartbreaking smile on her face. The same one she gave him, on a night so long ago, when he'd looked at her and told her it was *okay* .

"Do you love him?" she asks, and he's not sure, but it almost looks like she doesn't want to hear his answer.

Steve clears his throat, shrugs, and kills the last of their blunt before

flicking it away to the half frozen water if the quarry.

"I don't know. I don't think so." Steve says, and he remembers what loving Nancy felt like; remembers what falling for her felt like, and his face crumbles. "But I could. *God*, I could."

Jonathan reaches out and takes his hand. Squeezes.

Steve doesn't cry, but it's a close thing.

Eventually, they have to leave. Jonathan has to pick up Will, Nancy has to go with him to pick up Mike, and Steve has to grab Dustin and Lucas. It's just like any other afternoon. Just because Steve's chest is curling in on itself, slowly but surely, doesn't change that.

He thinks he might see Billy's Camaro when he idles up to the middle school parking lot. Thinks maybe just a glimpse of him with satiate this thirst he has. This longing for what *might have been*.

But Billy's Camaro isn't there. In its stead is Neil Hargrove pick-up truck.

Steve blinks at it for a long time before wrestling himself out of his car, not even bothering to kill the engine first. There's a sudden tightness in his chest. A *wrongness* at seeing Neil Hargrove sitting in Billy space, and for a moment all Steve can taste is tin. All he can remember are the bruises he'd seen on Billy's side, on Billy's jaw, and Steve is drowning in this god awful metallic taste in his mouth.

"Mr. Hargrove," Steve greets, smile stretched horribly thin over his face, and Billy's dad looks at him through the open window of his truck and replies in kind.

"Mr. Harrington, right?"

"Right," Steve bobs his head, throat working. "Are you here to pick up Max?"

"I am," he says it likes it's a hassle, jaw clenching, and then he spits at Steve's feet, saliva dark with what Steve recognizes as chew; Steve

takes a step back.

“Doesn’t Billy usually pick her up?” Steve asks, and his eyes drop to the big class ring on Neil Hargrove left hand; his voice is a little high, a little breathless, his chest too tight. “I didn’t see him in English today. Is he home sick?”

Neil Hargrove snorts, eyeing Steve for a moment before facing forward again. “No. Billy won’t be picking Max up anymore.”

Steve tries to keep his hands from shaking. “Oh? Why is that? Car trouble again?”

“I wish something like that would happen to that little shit,” he huffs out a bitter laugh, and Steve hates it. “Hope it does. Hope that bucket of bolts dies on him in the middle of nowhere. Would serve him right.”

“What--?” Steve falters when Billy’s dad looks at him, plasters on a bemused smile, and shoves his hands into his pockets because there’s no other way for him to keep them steady. “What do you mean? Did Billy go somewhere?”

“Yeah. That ungrateful little queer packed up in the middle of the night. No note, no nothing.” He spits again, shrugging, and shifts in his seat as the kids come pouring out of the school. “He’s long gone. Good riddance, I guess.”

Steve feels his stomach drop right to his soles. His chest pinches. His throat clicks when he swallows.

In his head, there’s a distant ringing.

“You babysit some of Maxine’s friends, don’t you?” Neil asks, and Steve blinks at him.

Nods. Too numb for anything else.

“It wouldn’t be too out of your way to pick up and drop off Maxine for school until we can arrange something better, would it? Don’t have much more than a little gas money to offer you--”

"That's fine," Steve croaks, and the kids are closer now, and Steve is backing away.

He needs to get out of here. He needs to leave.

"Alright, then." Neil Hargrove smiles at him, charming and grateful, and Steve wants to slug that look right off of his face-- wants to scream at him, lay into him, break him the way he feels like he's breaking-- because Billy is gone. "Tomorrow morning? We'll have Max ready and waiting by seven."

"That's fine," Steve repeats, because that's all he can say, even if it's the biggest lie he's ever told, because Billy is *gone* .

Dustin and Lucas reach him just as Max climbs into the pick-up truck. She meets his gaze, her eyes big and blue, and filled with something like an apology.

Steve doesn't know what that look means. Doesn't get to ask because Neil Hargrove is waving and pulling out. Driving away, Max in the passenger seat, and Steve watches even as Dustin yanks on his shirt.

"Steve?" he asks, voice pitched high, higher than it should be.

Steve's mouth is a flood of tin. Sharp and acrid and bitter on his tongue. He's shaking. He's *shaking* .

"Steve, buddy?" Dustin pulls again, and Lucas is already hollering at Mike and Will, and Will is already tapping on Nancy's window on the passenger side of Jonathan's beater. "Steve, are you okay?"

"No," Steve says, confesses, pale and shaking and stumbling back to slump against the side of the Beamer. "No, I'm not."

Because Billy Hargrove is *gone* .

The thing is, Steve hadn't realized how integral Billy had become in his daily life. Hadn't realized how much of his day, how much of his time, was spent with him. In the halls as school, in class, at the junkyard.

He hadn't realized Billy had carved a space into his life, into his heart, until Steve is left with the gaping chasm of Billy being gone.

And the thing is, Billy doesn't come back.

The first week passes, and Steve is waiting. Waiting for Billy to show up at his locker, in gym, to show up next to him in English. But he doesn't.

He goes to the junkyard, as if he might find him waiting there, but he isn't.

Max is tight lipped about it. Only tells him enough to know that Billy's alive, that he left of his own volition, and that he made her *promise* not to tell anyone where he went. Only tells him enough to keep Steve from taking it to Hopper, from demanding they look for him, from pointing an accusing finger at Neil Hargrove.

"My step-dad is an asshole, Steve." Max says, eyes on her lap, when he picks her up that first Tuesday after Billy is gone. "But he didn't do this. Billy left on his own."

"Did he--?" And Steve can't finish, can't force the words out, can't ask Max anymore because she looks so small in his passenger seat, Dustin and Lucas lingering in the backseat with eager eyes and eager ears. "Is he --?"

"I don't know," Max says, seems to know anyways, and she looks up at him with those big blue eyes that look so much like Billy's, even though they aren't related by blood, that Steve aches. "I don't know if he's coming back. But I hope he does."

But he doesn't. The first week bleeds into the second week, and Billy isn't there.

Steve dreams of him dead more often than not. Dreams of him beaten and bloodied and bruised in the junkyard. Of him torn to pieces in dark tunnels. Of him rotting on the side of a long highway

in the middle of nothing.

He wakes up screaming so many times that his mother starts keeping vigil. Sings him Italian lullabies until he's calm. Holds him until he stops shaking.

And the worst part isn't not knowing. It's not the fact that Billy is gone and Steve doesn't know where, or if he's okay-- it's that he knows it's *his fault*. That he scared Billy so deeply, that he asked so much of him, that Billy couldn't take it. That Billy left because of Steve.

When he tells Nancy that, under the bleachers during lunch on a warm spring day that feels so out of place it's laughable, she looks at him and tells him he's an idiot.

"What Billy Hargrove chose to do or not do is on *him*," she says, her fingers so tight around Steve's that it makes the bones ache. "Not you. And Steve-- I know you care about him. I know you're worried and hurt. But this isn't on you. And you can't let the guilt of something that isn't your fault ruin you like this."

"Ruin me?"

"You're exhausted," Nancy says, smile small, thumb dragging over his knuckles. "And you're going through the motions. And I hate it. I hate seeing you like this. And I hate Billy Hargrove for making you feel like this."

Steve lets out a short breath. "What do you think I should do?"

"Move on," Nancy says. "Move forward. You've still gotta turn your application in to Hopper, right? And the Spring Fling is coming up. You're helping set it up, right?"

"Yes," Steve says.

"Do that," Nancy says. "Turn your application in. Talk to Hop about what you need to do. Help set up for the dance. Maybe ask someone to go with you. There are plenty of girls that would."

Steve thinks that Nancy's right. That he should do exactly what she's

telling him.

But it sounds so exhausting. And he's already so tired.

"We'll be here," Nancy says. "All of us. Me, Jonathan, the kids. Hopper and Joyce. We'll all be here, Steve. When you can't do it alone, all you have to do is tell us."

Steve's throat works. He nods, carefully, and squeezes at her hand.

"Wanna volunteer with me?" he asks, smile crooked.

Nancy returns it, nudging at his knee with hers. "Already trying to rope me into helping with another dance?"

"Well, it's either you or Jonathan, and he's not nearly as good at roping balloons together as you are."

Nancy huffs. "He's useless with everything other than a camera."

Steve laughs, can't help but laugh, and the tightness that has been weighing on his chest for two weeks lessens some. Nancy laughs with him, and Steve feels light. Lighter than he has in days.

Steve is used to people leaving. Is used to moving beyond that, even if it takes a while. His parents have been coming and going his entire life.

When two weeks bleeds into three, the Spring Fling right around the corner, the days filled with more sunshine than rain, Steve realizes that he should stop waiting. That he shouldn't have been waiting in the first place.

Billy never asked him to. He doesn't really think Billy would *want* him to.

So, he fills his days with rowdy kids, with afternoons filled with laughter, with a longing for the summer right around the corner. He fills them with school work, with dance planning with Jenny and the rest of student council and her friends. With lunches he spends with

Jonathan and Nancy, on the bleachers instead of in the library, enjoying the growing warmth of each day. He fills them with dinners with his mother, until she's sure he's on his feet again, and he sends her back west with his dad, assuring all the while that they'll make a trip, together, for spring break in the middle of April. That he'll let her drag him to Italy to show him her old stomping grounds.

He fills them with so much joy, that any pain or hurt or longing is mostly forgotten.

Mostly forgotten, but not completely lost. There's too much joy there, too, in the memories of cold days and colder nights spent laughing with Billy. Too much understanding and care and hope in the moments in between. And Steve wouldn't give up those moments, not even the ones that ended up stinging, for the world.

It's the Saturday before the Spring Fling. The Saturday before the week that leads into spring break. Steve feels like there's not enough time in a single day, not for everything he's using to keep himself occupied.

It feels like every teacher in Hawkins planned to drown their students in exams and papers before the break could begin. It feels like everyone is itching for the week off, ready for it, practically vibrating out of their skin for it. Steve kind of is, too.

So, he drags the kids out to the quarry. It's finally warm enough now that the water won't give them hypothermia. And he thinks they could all use a little fun.

The day is clear and sunny and warm. Both Will and Mike end up getting sunburnt, Mike pouting the whole time that El couldn't be there with them, and Max cackling at the ridiculous red of his face and shoulders. Lucas and Dustin are standing, dripping wet, near one of the trees, a few yards of rope in between them, arguing about the best way to fasten the thing to one of the upper limbs.

Steve watches, propped back on his elbows, his hair swept back and his skin drying under the heat of the Indiana sun from his spot on the

blanket from his trunk. Watches as Mike and Max start trying to dunk each other. As Will paddles away laughing, coming up for a breather to plop down, huddled in a towel next to Steve. As Lucas shoves Dustin into the water and he comes up sputtering.

He watches and knows this is exactly where he wants to be. Where he needs to be. And he's happy.

On Sunday, Steve juggles five cups of coffee and a box of fresh donuts from the diner on Main into the police station. Florence greets him by peering over her glasses at him.

"Morning," he says, grin a bit lopsided, and he shuffles the things around in his arms to carefully set a cup of coffee down on her desk.

She's trying not to smile, but her eyes are narrowed on the box in his other hand.

"Those better not be what I think they are," she says.

"Of course not," Steve smiles. "It smells like donuts, but it's actually fresh fruit and veggies."

"You're an awful liar, Mr. Harrington." Florence huffs, but waves him through to the back of the station. "Don't let the Chief get more than one of those. I'll *know*."

"Cross my heart," Steve says, skirting around her desk, and the second he's back and Powell and Callahan catch sight of him, they're on their feet and taking the load off of his hands.

"I already like you ten times better than Callahan, kid." Powell says, grabbing a coffee and dodging Callahan's grabby hands for the box of donuts. "And you don't even work here, yet."

Steve can't help the way his chest brims with warmth at that, but he nods his head toward the box. "Save the jelly filled one for your boss, would you? He'll kill me with his eyes if you don't."

"Kill you with more than that," Powell says. "His office door is open."

I think he'd like the break from paperwork on the raccoon infestation at Earl's."

"You have to do paperwork on that?"

"You do when crazy Earl insists in a B&E," Callahan says, from around a mouthful of maple bar. "The shit you get to look forward to, kid."

Steve huffs out a little laugh, but nods as he goes, bringing his two remaining coffees back with him toward Hopper's office. The door is cracked, and he raps his knuckles against the door jamb and leans in when he gets there.

Hopper looks up, from a desk full of paperwork, and his grin is more of a grimace as he beckons Steve inside.

"I see you brought the good stuff," Hopper says, as Steve hands him a cup of coffee, taking a seat in the wooden chair in front of his desk.

"It's not the good stuff unless it's spiked," Steve says. "And I didn't bring a flask."

Hopper snorts out a laugh, giving Steve a narrow eyed look of warning, but it's half-hearted. "It's the thought that counts."

They share a grin over their paper cups. Hopper mutters something about finishing up a report, but he rummages around in one of his drawers as Steve watches on.

"I wanted to talk to you about your application," Hopper says.

A tightness winds through Steve's shoulders, but he shifts in his seat and sits up straight. "What about it?"

"Just your letter, here." Hopper says, pulling it free, and Steve blinks at it as Hopper holds it away from his face and squints down at it. *"Even though I am from a small town, I have been surrounded by heroes my entire life. From the woman who works at the drugstore, raising two sons on her own, to the girl who was raised in cruelty and shows nothing but kindness. I have seen heroes in the people who have opened their doors to me when I needed it most, and in the selfless bravery of children*

scared for their friends.”

Steve wants to crawl right out of his skin. His face is red. His ears are redder. Hopper peers at him over the top of the paper.

“After being surrounded by these people, after seeing them suffer through pain and overcome it, I have realized that I want to be brave, too. That I want to be the hero they need, so that they no longer have to fill those shoes themselves.”

Hopper sighs, setting the paper down on his desk, and he laces his fingers together over the top of it as he leans forward on his elbows.

Steve’s eyes linger on the letter, fingers flexing over his paper cup, before he finally meets Hopper’s eyes.

“You really feel that way?” Hopper asks.

“Yes,” he says, throat working. “Yeah, I... I’m tired of watching other people suffer. I want-- If there’s any way for me to lessen that suffering, or share the burden, that’s what I want. I want to help.”

Hopper nods slowly, eyes narrowed on Steve’s face. “You’re a good fuckin’ kid, Steve. And this is a good goddamn letter.”

“I didn’t write it by myself.” Steve sinks in his seat. “Nancy helped. And my English teacher.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Hopper says, smile wry and crooked. “It’s genuine. That’s what matters. And I’ve already sent a copy up to a friend in Chicago at the police academy there.”

Steve’s eyes go wide.

“We’re too small to have one here, and you can always decide to go to Indianapolis instead,” Hopper shrugs, leaning back in his seat with a huff. “But they’ve got a rigorous program in Chicago. You’d be there for about six months for training, and then probably another six on probation. Then you could transfer back down here. And we’d be happy to have you, Steve.”

Steve feels something in him come loose. Something that he hadn’t realized was there. A fear he hadn’t known, but had felt his entire

life.

He returns the smile on Hopper's face with a weak, grateful one of his own.

"Thanks, Hop."

"Of course, kid." Hopper says, then lifts his coffee cup. "I'll have all the details ready for you by tomorrow afternoon. But if you wanna secure your position, you should bring this kinda stuff by more often."

Steve snorts. "Consider it done."

"And Steve?" Hopper says, as Steve is pushing to his feet. "Take it from me when I say that we're *all* proud of you."

Steve falters, and his smile goes a little bit watery.

"Thanks, Hop."

"Anytime, kid. Now get outta here. I gotta finish up this paperwork."

"See you tomorrow, Hop." Steve says, and steps out of his office.

He snatches up a donut on his way out the door, shares a smile with Florence, and walks out the front door with something light and hopeful unfurling in his chest.

That night, Steve makes a phone call to his parents' hotel. His dad picks up on the second ring, sighs, and asks if he'd like to speak with his mother when he hears his voice.

"Actually, no." Steve says. "I wanted to talk to you."

Steve's father falters, and Steve can hear the groan of a chair shifting as he settles in, probably at a desk in whatever suite they've gotten for themselves. "What about?"

“After graduation,” Steve says. “And this summer.”

“What about them?”

“I wanted to let you know,” Steve stops, hesitates, closes his eyes and grips the phone tight. “I wanted to let you know that I intend to take the summer to travel a bit. And then I’m going to Chicago, to the police academy there.”

There’s a long pause. “You want to be a police officer? Don’t you think that’s a bit ambitious? What if you don’t get in, Steven?”

“I already got in,” Steve says. “And I-- I know the plan was always for me to start working under you. Learn the business. But this is what I want. This is what I’m going to do.”

And there’s another pause. A longer one.

He can picture the look on his father’s face. The pinch of his brows, the creases around his mouth from scowling so often throughout the years.

“Okay,” he finally says. “If that’s what you want, I can’t stop you. I can’t say I’m not disappointed, because I am. But if this is something you’re certain you want, that you’re already accepted into, then there’s nothing else for me to say.”

Steve lets out a shuddering breath. “Thanks, dad.”

“If it doesn’t work out, there’s always a place for you in the business.” His dad sighs. “And I’ve no doubt your mother will insist on getting you everything your heart desires.”

“I have money saved up, dad--”

“No son of mine will slum it in the city,” his dad snaps, and then softens some. “Save your money for whatever it is you have planned for the summer. When we get home, and when you and your mother return from Venice, we’ll take a trip up during the weekend and find you a place. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Steve says, slumping, voice going breathy and soft with

relief. "Thank you, dad."

"Of course," he says. "If that's all?"

"That's all."

"We'll see you when we get home, Steven. Have a good evening."

"You too, dad." Steve says. "Tell mom I love her."

"I will."

They don't say it to each other. Have never really said to each other.

But suddenly, overwhelmingly, Steve thinks he doesn't have to. That, in his own way, his dad wants him to succeed. In whatever form that may take.

"Bye, dad."

"Goodnight, Steve."

"You don't think that looks tacky?" Jenny asks, her head cocked as Steve and another senior balance the archway of balloons near the double doors of the gymnasium, on Monday during lunch. "Wheeler, what do you think?"

Nancy's lips press thin as she stares at the balloons, and she shares a look with Steve. "I think it's very... pink?"

"Too much pink?" Jenny asks.

"Maybe a bit too much pink," Nancy says.

"Well, I mean, it's supposed to be... like spring time. Like flowers?" Jenny huffs, blowing a bubble and crossing her arms, and tilting her head the other way.

"Maybe white mixed in with the pink?" Nancy says. "Like, alternating?"

“Oh, that’s perfect.” Jenny nods, ponytail bouncing. “Can we take apart the whole thing and start again?”

Jeremy groans from across Steve, and lets go of his end of the arch. The balloons come unwound as it tips, spilling out by the dozens in a mess on the floor, taking Steve in the swarm.

When he pops back up, his hair is sticking straight up from the static electricity. Nancy tries to hide her snort behind a hand and fails. There’s the flash of a camera from somewhere near the bleachers, and Steve doesn’t have to look to know who it is.

He flips Jonathan off and brushes the balloons aside as he shoves to his feet.

Laughing, Jenny comes over and plucks one of the balloons sticking to his sweater. “You okay, Stevie?”

“Yeah,” Steve says, dragging his fingers through his hair, trying to tame it back down. “But if we keep redoing things, there’s no way this’ll be ready by Friday.”

There’s the smell of paint in the air. There are three girls over on the floor watching the two of them and giggling, Carol at the center, as they paint out *Spring Fling* in big letters across a banner.

Steve tries not to go too red in the face as Jenny reaches up and smoothes down his hair for him, shocking them both with a little *pop* of sound. She jerks her hand back with another little laugh, and when Steve looks at Nancy, she’s glancing pointedly between the two of them.

“We’ll be ready,” Jenny says. “Half the fun is screwing up and then rushing last minute.”

“That’s fun?”

Jenny shrugs. “To me, it is. Like doing an essay the day before it’s due. The rush of last second.”

Steve’s throat works. “Well, speaking of last second. You don’t... you don’t have a date, yet, do you? For the dance?”

Jenny's smile goes wide. "No, I can't say I do."

"Would you like to go with me?" Steve asks, compressing one of the balloons between his hands a little, fingers flexing over the latex.

"As friends?" Jenny asks. "Or can I count on some more panty dropping behavior?"

"Ah," Steve huffs out a nervous laugh. "As friends. If that's alright with you."

"That's fine, Steve." Jenny smiles. "I've always wanted to have Steve Harrington as my arm candy."

"Arm candy?" Steve can't help his grin, or the way the back of his neck warms.

"Please," Jenny rolls her eyes. "You're the most gorgeous boy in this school-- now that Hargrove is gone, anyway."

There's a pang of something. Like loss and like longing. But Steve swallows it down.

"Pick me up at seven," Jenny says as someone calls her name from across the gym. "We have to get here early to make sure everything's perfect."

"Sure," he says, watching her go, and then he turns to Nancy where she's sat with Jonathan.

When Nancy lifts a brow, Steve rolls his eyes hard. But he knows she knows, and as Jeremy waves him over to help restring the new arch, Steve goes with a crooked smile on his face.

Dustin insists on tagging along with him when Steve goes to the police station after school. He helps him carry the coffee, even though he only got one for Florence and Hopper this time, while clutching to a hot chocolate with way too much whipped cream on top of it.

“So, you’re really gonna move to Chicago?” Dustin asks. “Like, away from us?”

“Only for a year at the most,” Steve assures. “For training and stuff. Then, I’ll be back and working for Hopper.”

“A whole *year*,” Dustin groans.

Laughing, Steve glances down at him. “It’s not that long.”

“It’s like an eternity, Steve!” Dustin says, and Steve is so busy laughing, so busy watching him gesticulate with his hands full, that he doesn’t see the door opening in his face until it’s too late.

It knocks him back a step, coffee spilling hot out over his fingers as he hisses and shakes out his hand with a curse. He asks Dustin for a napkin, but Dustin is too busy staring, eyes wide, at whoever just came out the door.

When Steve looks up, he sees why. Billy’s standing there, a white dress shirt open and tucked into a pair of jeans, medallion hanging from around his neck, and earring from his ear. His hair looks a little shorter, a little neater, and his skin looks warm; like he’s spent the last month in the sun and nowhere else.

His eyes are wide and blue and on Steve’s face. There’s a stack of papers clutched in his hand.

Then, he smiles. “Hey, pretty boy.”

And Steve-- Steve doesn’t know what to say to that.

He just knows that Billy Hargrove is standing in front of him, looking just as gorgeous as the last time Steve saw him. He just knows that Billy Hargrove is standing in front of him, and that Steve was half certain that he wouldn’t ever see him again.

He just knows that Billy Hargrove is back.

14. love was all we knew (and all I knew was you)

Steve is distracted the entire time he's sitting down with Hopper. He keeps having to ask Hop to repeat himself, smile guilty and small and maybe a bit ashamed.

Hopper doesn't seem to mind. He ends up handing a copy of all the details over in a large manila envelope, tying it off with a smile, and sending Steve on his way.

Steve doesn't really want to go, though. Not when he knows Billy is waiting outside. Or, at the very least, that he'd said he would wait for Steve outside. But Steve isn't sure how good Billy's word is, these days.

When he steps out, Billy is waiting. He'd taken the time to pull his Camaro around from wherever he'd had it parked, and he's kicked back against it, arms crossed over the open front of his shirt, and frowning down at where Dustin is standing before him, hands planted on his hips. Billy's got a look on his face that would have made Steve laugh on any other day-- brows drawn together, lips pressed thin, like he's trying his best to understand whatever is coming out of Dustin's mouth and is failing spectacularly.

Steve knows the look. He's worn it more than once himself.

"Hey," he says, and then Billy's eyes are on him.

He pushes off the car, arms uncrossing, and he pauses long enough to dig into his pocket and pull out a ten dollar bill, shoving it against Dustin's chest, eyes not leaving Steve's face even when Steve looks away. "Raincheck, kid."

"We're finishing this conversation. I *will* track you down, dickhole." Dustin insists, but he's taking the ten and shoving it into the pocket of his hoody, looking over at Steve with a cheeky smile. "I'm gonna meet up with Lucas at the arcade. Catch you later?"

Steve frowns. "Will you need a ride home?"

"Probably," Dustin bobs his head, padding over and nudging his shoulder into Steve's side. "Pizza later?"

"Mooch," Steve says, clapping his hand on top of Dustin's head, shuffling his hat around until Dustin bats him away. "Your mom would kill me if I spoiled your dinner."

"Later, Steve." Dustin says, grinning as he backs away, and Steve watches him go until he's down past the corner and jogging across the street and Steve's left standing there with Billy Hargrove.

Sighing, Steve shifts on his feet, palming his hand against the jean of his pant leg before looking back over at Billy. He's standing there, waiting, thumbs hooked into the pockets of his jeans. He's still looking at Steve.

"So, you're back, I take it." Steve says, picking at the string tying the envelope in his hands shut.

"I am. Hadn't planned on staying away so long-- but California beaches, man. Riptide pulls you out and doesn't let go." Billy takes a slow step forward, wetting his lips, and Steve feels his shoulders draw up and back. "Did you miss me?"

Steve jaw winds tight. He stares at Billy for a second, until the grin on his face falters, and his brows draw together.

"Steve?"

Steve doesn't know how to respond to him. Doesn't know what to do with him.

So he doesn't.

He turns on his heel, moves as if to walk away, but Billy is already reaching for him. Already catching him by the arm and pulling him back, unyielding but gentle.

"Hey, hey, I'm sorry." Billy says, and Steve blinks at that, pressing his tongue to the roof of his mouth until his temples ache a little. "I'm

sorry. I didn't mean-- Well, I mean, I *did* mean, but-- That was stupid."

And Steve can't help but snap back. "Which part?"

Billy's fingers curl a little tighter on his arm. Not painful. But firm enough to feel.

"You're mad at me," he says, and it isn't a question.

"What gave me away?"

"I'm sorry," Billy repeats, squeezing at his arm. "Let me make it up to you. I'll buy you pie from that diner just outside of town."

Steve wants to laugh. Wants to scoff and ask: *do you think pie will make this better? Do you think it'll make the last few weeks disappear? Like you did?*

Wants to tell him *no* and walk away. Because he's tired of Billy walking away from him.

"Just wanna talk to you, Steve." Billy says, thumb dragging in slow lines against his bicep. "Tell you where I went and why."

Steve breathes out a short, sharp breath. He pulls away, but then he nods.

"Fine," he says. "But you're buying me fries, too."

Steve picks at the fries, eyeing Billy from across the table, and the coke that's sweating, leaving a ring of water at the base. He remembers a time before, when they were sitting here, and Steve confessed the biggest guilt he harbored in his heart.

This time, Billy is seated facing the door. He's the one with a story to tell. Steve's the one waiting for answers.

"You look good," Billy says, instead, fingertips drumming over the table top, his other arm slung across the back of the booth.

When Steve looks up, brow raised, Billy's lips press thin.

"I mean, you look like you've been sleeping. You've got this..." Billy waggles his fingers at him. "I dunno. You look good."

Steve stabs a fry into the pool of ketchup on his plate.

Billy sighs. "C'mon, Steve. Give me *something* --"

"I'm surprised you came back," Steve says, and Billy jerks a bit, blinking. "Coulda stayed in California. Not like anyone put a missing persons out on you."

It feels too cruel, the moment he says it. But Billy smiles, self-deprecating and small.

"Not too surprised by that," Billy says. "I'm sure my pops was more than happy to find me gone."

"I've been driving Max around," Steve says, instead of anything else.

"I'm sure the boys love that."

"Dustin hates it," Steve says. "She always steals the front seat."

Billy grins, wide and bright, and Steve realizes he's never seen Billy like this. So at ease in his own skin. Genuine, without so much anger hiding under the surface.

"She try and fuck with the radio, too?"

"Unlike some people, she actually appreciates The Police," Steve says, and he bites the inside of his cheek as Billy laughs and leans forward on his elbows, eyes bright and so blue on Steve's face.

"I fuckin' missed you, Harrington."

"Yeah?" Steve asks, words bitter on his tongue, heart turning over in his chest. "You've got a funny way of showing it."

Billy's face falls. "Steve --"

"No," Steve says, reaches across the table, steals Billy's coke, and

takes a sip, throat dry and mouth prickling. "You don't get to do this. Run away and come back, like it doesn't matter. You didn't even tell me where you *went* --"

"I told Max--"

"Who didn't tell me, because you made her promise." Steve's lips press thin, his tone too terse, and he knows he's wearing his hurt on his sleeve, and he's shamed by it, that Billy leaving wounded him so thoroughly-- that he felt like a dying animal, chest caved in, when he thought he lost him for good. "Forget the night at the theatre and the junkyard. Forget the party. Billy-- *Christ*, you're my friend and I was worried *sick* that something had happened. That you had gotten hurt -- or I had done something --"

"Hey," Billy reaches out, places a hand over Steve's wrist, and grips it tight. "My leaving had nothing to do with you."

"Bullshit," Steve hisses, jerks back; he nearly spills the soda over the table.

"Steve," Billy takes a breath, nostrils flaring out, and Steve watches the irritation war with something more desperate as Billy's jaw winds tight. "I left because I needed to figure some shit out. Yeah, some of that had to do with you, but it was never *because* of you. Okay?"

Steve isn't sure if he believes that. Still has the guilt he's been swallowing on his tongue like a bitter aftertaste.

He stares at Billy, from across the table, and holds still. Holds steady.

"And what shit did you figure out?" he asks, and pointedly eyes Billy's tan skin. "How to catch a sick half-pipe?"

Billy's eyes narrow.

Steve thinks maybe he's being unfair. Tongue too sharp, words too cutting. Worries, for a second, he'll flay Billy open without meaning to.

"That I'm a coward," Billy says, plain and sure and even, and Steve blinks. "That I'd rather fight my way through something than deal

with it-- but I already knew that. And you were right. I need help, and it's not something you can give me."

The fight rushes right out of him. Steve feels stunned. It's heavier than Billy smashing a plate over his head. Headier than Billy kissing him.

Steve glances down at his hands. Picks at his own fingers.

Chews on Billy's words and swallows them down.

"You figured all that out, huh?" Steve asks.

"Yeah. With a little help from some old friends," Billy says, dipping his head to catch Steve's eyes. "Figured out some other stuff, too."

Steve's throat works.

"Mostly how I feel about you," Billy's voice lowers. "And why I kept running."

Something clenches in Steve's chest. He feels his ribs creak. Feels his heart groan. He is a house in shambles and about to collapse.

He's not ready. Feels like his foundations are crumbling. He's not ready for whatever Billy's about to say. He won't survive it.

"It's why I came back," Billy says. "To finish school. To stick it to my dad-- got the emancipation papers in the car -- and to stick around for Max after. Make sure she's okay. To see you."

Steve's walls start crumbling. Brick by brick.

"I'm leaving after graduation," Steve says in a rush.

Billy blinks like he's been slapped.

He stares at him, and then Steve sighs and shoves his plate away. He's far from hungry, now.

"Where are you going?"

"Nowhere." Steve says, then shrugs. "Everywhere. After that, I'm

moving to Chicago.”

“Chicago,” Billy repeats, nodding slowly, throat working. “Why, uh... why Chicago?”

“Police training,” Steve says. “Then, I’ll probably move back down here. And stay here.”

Billy’s still nodding. “Gonna be a cop, huh, pretty boy? You’d look good in a uniform.”

Steve thinks Billy is trying to flirt. Trying to pull some of their old levity into the situation.

Steve thinks he’s supposed to grin, to mention something about handcuffs, just to see Billy grin. To see his eyes light up.

“Yeah,” Steve says. “Yeah, I’m -- yeah.”

Billy lets out a long breath, leaning back. “I’m... glad. Happy for you, or something, I guess. That you figured out what you want.”

Steve’s lips press thin.

“Shit, I guess a lot can change in a month,” Billy says, looks away, jaw tight and fingers twitching over the top of the table.

“What did you think would happen, Billy?” Steve asks, a little sharp. “When you came back?”

“No, that’s not --” Billy huffs, scrubbing a hand over his face. “Harrington, I’m not -- I mean, I’m a little shocked, but I’m... it’s not that I’m not happy for you. I am. Of course, I am.”

“But?”

“But I’m a selfish prick,” Billy says, smile grim. “Something else I’ve learned. And I don’t want to watch you walk away.”

“You’ve made me watch you walk away twice, now.”

Billy’s lips press thin. “I’m not gonna do that again. Not unless you

tell me to.”

Steve sucks in a wavering breath. “How am I supposed to believe that?”

Billy smiles.

“I’ll prove it to you.”

“So, Billy’s back.”

“Yes, Dustin.”

“Did he tell you where he went?”

“Yes, Dustin.”

“Did he tell you *why* he left?”

“ Yes , Dustin.”

“ *And?*” Dustin bounces on his toes, his jacket from earlier in the day cinched around his waist-- it’s that time of year where some mornings you can still see your breath, but by afternoon, you’re sweating bullets-- as he bounds toward Steve’s Beamer. “What are you gonna do about it?”

“Nothing,” Steve shrugs, jingling his keys between his fingers, his eyes forward and not on Dustin’s eager face.

“ *Nothing?* You’re gonna forgive him?” Dustin stops. “Just like that?”

“I’m not a *priest* , Dustin.” Steve says, and Dustin scrambles to follow him. “Forgiveness isn’t my specialty. If he wants that, he’ll have to go somewhere else. I have nothing to forgive him for.”

“But he *left* you--”

“No,” Steve turns to look at him, halting him in his tracks. “No, Dustin. He didn’t--”

Steve glances around. There aren't very many people out this late in the afternoon, not off of Main and by the arcade, but there's enough. Steve sighs and shuffles closer. His voice drops.

"He didn't *leave me* . We weren't even *together* , okay?"

Dustin's nose scrunches up.

"We weren't-- *aren't* -- anything but friends," Steve says. "Maybe-- *Maybe* we could've been... more. Together. But we weren't. We aren't."

Dustin's head cocks, and his eyes narrow. Steve feels very much like one of his science projects.

"But you could be," Dustin eventually says.

Steve's shoulders sag.

"You still wanna be, right?" Dustin asks.

And Steve knows it's true. Thinks about lying. Thinks about sleepless nights. Thinks about laughing in the headlights of Billy's Camaro, beer on his breath, sweat on his skin.

Thinks about missing that, and the way he always rested easier, dreamless, after a night with Billy. Thinks about Billy's arm draped over his shoulders in the hallways and how it hadn't made his heart pound-- it had made him settle, into the spaces between his own bones; it had made him calm.

He thinks about lying. He doesn't.

Friends don't lie.

"I do," Steve says, with hesitation, and Dustin lights up again-- like Steve and Billy are some star-crossed lovers, destined to come together, and Steve doesn't want to tell him those stories usually end in tears. "But I don't *need* to be."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Steve huffs, looks away, and thinks about Nancy's big eyes, then her laugh, then her hand in his. "I mean, it won't be the end of me if it doesn't work out. I'd like it, if I knew I could trust him not to... not to--"

"Run off and break your heart?"

"Jesus, you're fucking dramatic." Steve grins, palms the top of Dustin's ballcap, and tucks his hands, steady and sure, into his pockets. "But, yeah. Sure. That. It'd be nice-- I like him. A lot."

Dustin scrapes his teeth along his tongue, making a face, pretending to gag.

Steve rolls his eyes. "But I've got other plans. Still gotta graduate. Go to the academy. Watch out for you idiots. Being with Billy-- it's a nice thought. Like a daydream or some shit, but if it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen."

Dustin nods slow. "Kinda like me and Max, right? Like, I liked her, but... we're just friends, now."

"Yeah," Steve says. "And it's hard sometimes, but it's better, being friends or just being happy for the time-- however brief-- they were in your life."

"Yeah," Dustin nods, gaze dropping, and Steve claps a hand onto his shoulder and starts leading him toward the car. "But you would, right? If he got his shit together? You'd wanna be with him?"

Steve thinks it would be easier to say no. He doesn't.

"Yes."

Steve doesn't see Billy until fourth period. He'd *heard* plenty-- Max a chatter in the front seat, the whole ride in, about how Billy showed up the night before *with Hopper* to collect his things from the house. About how Hopper had dressed Neil down, slapped some papers against his chest, and warned him so soft, so stern, that he was to *keep his hands to himself or suffer the consequences* that Neil had gone

from beet red to sheet white so quick Max thought he was going to pass out. About how when Billy had finished packing away his things into the Camaro and into Hopper's truck, he'd stopped and given her his address-- *Hop's old place* -- and his number if she ever needed it.

Max had promptly told him she'd call Hopper *first* , thanks, and Billy had apparently laughed so hard he'd cried.

Steve wishes he'd been there to see it. Or maybe to rub it in Neil Hargrove's face. Or maybe just to be there, for Billy, even as just a friend; it couldn't have been easy.

But Steve only sees the Camaro when he gets to school in the morning. Doesn't see Billy at his locker or in the halls-- not until he walks into English and Billy is already there, turning in an essay on Bronte that is three weeks too old.

"It's a lot of work to catch up on," Miss Klein tells him. "You could always take summer classes, instead--"

"I think I can manage," Billy says, with one of those grins, and Steve blinks as Miss Klein *blushes* . "I'll just get some help from Harrington. Right, pretty boy?"

Steve hadn't realized he'd come to a stop just inside the door. Hadn't realized Billy had noticed him until those blue eyes were on him. That grin directed his way.

It hasn't worked before. It won't work now.

"I'm barely passing this class," Steve says.

Billy's lips purse.

Steve ignores the look. Steps past him. Heads to his desk as the rest of the students file in.

Billy is hot on his heels.

"Can I sit next to you?"

Steve nearly drops his books. Twists around to look at him, mouth opening and then shutting again.

“You never ask,” Steve says.

“I’m asking, now.” Billy shrugs, the heather grey of his shirt bunching around his shoulders, and Steve gets a good look at him for the first time that day; how he looks tired, but his shoulders are easy and loose; how there’s something far more welcoming about his clothes, his posture, his eyes than Steve usually sees outside of the two of them, the night sky, and the junkyard. Something softer. It’s nice, if a little jarring. “You okay with me sitting next to you?”

“Um,” Steve blinks, slides into his seat, and shrugs. “Sure. Go for it.”

Billy grins like he’s won something.

Maybe he has.

Somehow, and Steve isn’t exactly clear how, but somehow Billy becomes his shadow. He feels him, right on his heels, all day. And the next. It’s like he’s around every corner, behind every door. Steve nearly smacks right into him on his way to gym.

“Easy, pretty boy.” Billy says, hands on his shoulders, and Steve jerks back, steps away, huffs out a short sound. “You okay?”

“I’m *fine*,” Steve says, shouldering by, heading into the locker room. “Jesus.”

“You don’t seem fine,” Billy says, trailing after him.

“Yeah, well, I am.” Steve spins his combination in and jerks his locker door open. “Maybe you just forgot what that looks like.”

“Am I bothering you?”

“Yes,” Steve says instantly, quickly, slams his locker door shut again, startling one of the other guys down the aisle.

Billy looks at him. Tilts his head, purses his lips, and lets his eyes stray.

“You want me to leave you alone?” he asks.

Steve falters. Presses his tongue to the roof of his mouth. Lets out a shuddering breath.

He turns away, pulling his shirt up over his head to shrug on his gym clothes.

“I don’t know what you’re doing,” Steve says.

“I’m just trying to show you--”

“Following me around, being all *nice* , isn’t gonna prove anything.” Steve snaps, toeing off his sneakers and shoving his pants down.

He looks up and Billy’s eyes are dark on him. He sees his throat work. Sees his fingers twitch. Steve goes still.

Then, he moves quickly. Tugs his shorts up and over his hips and plops down onto the bench so he can work his gym shoes on.

Billy hasn’t moved from where he’s leaning against the locker next to Steve’s.

“What will?”

“I don’t *know* ,” Steve says. “Jesus, Billy. How am I supposed to know that?”

“I just wanna show you that I can--”

“ *Don’t* ,” Steve looks up at him, watches as Billy blinks, as his throat works. “Don’t do anything for me. Do it for *you* , dickhead.”

Billy stalls. But Steve sees his shoulders go easy. Sees him let out a long breath.

“Heard we’re playing dodgeball today,” Billy says. “You gonna pick me to be on your team?”

Steve snorts.

When they get onto the court and the coach picks Steve and another senior as captains, he picks Tommy.

“You made a mixtape,” Steve says, staring at the cassette in his palm.

Jenny rolls her eyes. “I made a *sample* . Just some possible songs they might play. Figured we could test it out with everybody.”

Steve grins. “You made a mixtape.”

“Yeah, yeah, Stevie.” Jenny shoves at him. “Just put it in, already.”

There are streamers everywhere. The gymnasium is decked out, top to bottom, in pinks and whites and purples. They’ve got the entrance tied off with balloons, and one of Jenny’s friends has been going on and on about getting confetti all over the floor-- how it would look like petals on the ground, and if they could get a big enough fan, it could push them around. None of them want to deal with that kind of clean up.

Nancy is lounging with Jonathan on the bleachers, talking quietly with one another. He’s got his camera in hand; everyone is excited about the yearbook photos.

Steve crouches down to the boombox and pops the cassette into place. Presses play and grins as the first notes of *Kiss* starts playing, falsetto filling the room.

He looks up at Jenny, brows up, and she huffs and crosses her arms. “Prince?” he asks.

“It’s upbeat.”

“I think the teachers might riot.”

“Creative liberties,” Jenny waves a hand, but her smile is wide as Steve starts bobbing his head along.

It goes wider when Steve starts mouthing along, on his knees in front of her, and she tosses her head back with a laugh when he crawls forward.

“ I just want your extra time, and your...” He kisses at her, and she pushes his face away.

Over by one of the banners, Carol whistles. At her side, Tommy actually laughs.

“Nice moves, Harrington!”

Steve’s head drops as he laughs, shoulders shaking. He pushes to his feet and Jenny has a bright, wicked look in her eye as she glances over his shoulder.

“Is that all you’ve got?” she asks as Prince squeals from the speakers--
I wanna be your fantasy .

Steve spots Jeremy dipping one of the girls by the balloon arch. He barks out another laugh, head shaking.

“Not even close.”

Spinning Jenny around is easy. She follows beautifully, reminds Steve of the girls at his dad’s country club, all loose limbs and confidence as he guides her across the floor.

She’s laughing as he dips her. Laughing as he thumbs the top buttons of his polo open with a flare. Laughing as he takes her by the hips and spins them around until they’re both dizzy.

Even when he pulls away, air guitaring his way by Tommy and Carol, stopping long enough to steal a few paper flowers, Jenny hides her mirth behind a hand.

Nancy is, too, when he drops onto the bleachers between her and Jonathan’s knees, holding out paper roses for the both of them. Jonathan has his camera out; Steve wonders if he’s been taking pictures this whole time and then thinks *of course he was .*

“I just want your extra time,” Steve croons, grinning as they pluck

wire stems from his fingers. “And your--”

He turns his head toward Nancy, lips pursed like he might offer up his lips, and stalls when he sees Billy Hargrove leaning in the open double doors.

“--kiss.”

Nancy’s eyes follow his. The plucking guitar fades, and Steve feels her fingers curl over his shoulder.

The track switches over as Jenny turns and greets him. She practically bounces over, ponytail bobbing, and Steve can’t quite make out what she says as The Outfield starts belting out of the speakers-- *so many things that I wanna say* -- but it’s enough to coax Billy’s eyes away from his. Jonathan’s knee nudges into his shoulder. Steve glances up at him.

Jonathan’s smile is a soft thing. Steve hadn’t realized how red in the face, how *embarrassed* , he’d been until some of it bleeds. Until he cools down a little.

He looks back at Billy to see him smiling that charming smile, to see him shake his head, to see him ask Jenny something and watch her gesture over to where Steve’s sitting. Watches as Billy glances at him and then makes his way over.

He hasn’t really seen him since their chat in the locker room yesterday. Went all day without Billy hovering, this time. It made him itch all over, but he wasn’t going to start complaining. Not when it seemed like Billy might be actually listening to his advice for once.

Steve feels like everyone is watching. He knows it’s not true. Knows it’s all being drowned out by Tony Lewis-- *you know I’d do anything for you; stay the night but keep it under cover* - - but it makes his pulse quicken even as Jenny goes back to directing some of the paper flower placements.

“If it isn’t the three amigos,” Billy grins, thumbs hooked in his pockets. “I didn’t know you all had such a hard-on for school spirit.”

“Billy,” Nancy says, and Steve jolts as her fingers go to his hair,

carding through until he relaxes back onto the bleachers between them. "Was there something you wanted?"

"Yeah, actually," he says, eyes hot on Steve's face, until they're not and he's looking at Nancy. "I need your help, Wheeler."

Nancy falters. "You do?"

"Yeah, see-- I've been kinda *gone* for a while, if you hadn't noticed," Billy says, shrugging like a month missing is nothing. "Talked to my guidance counselor after class today; she said to talk to you about tutoring-- so I can catch up with all that I missed."

"You want me to tutor you?"

"Don't get excited," Billy makes a face. "I only need it for science and math. Everything else is practically review work."

"Um, okay, yeah. I'd be happy to help."

"Cool," Billy says, eyes flitting to Jonathan and then to Steve. "You free over spring break?"

"Yes."

"Perfect. We'll figure out a time and place later," Billy says. "See you guys tomorrow."

And then he's turning on his heel, walking away, and Steve watches him go.

"That was weird," Jonathan says, over the top of Steve's head, and Steve's hand is fisted into the frayed jean at his knee.

Try to stop my hands from shaking--

Nancy shrugs, picking at the paper flower in her hand. "Steve?"

--but something in my mind's not making sense.

"I'll be right back," he says, pushing to his feet, ignoring the way Nancy says his name again as he follows after Billy's wake, across the

court, out the door, into the hall that leads to the locker rooms--

It's been a while since we were all alone--

--and Billy's there. Waiting. Waiting like he knows Steve better than Steve knows himself-- and that's not *fair* .

He grins when he sees him, brow arching, and Steve bites down hard on the inside of his cheek as he shuffles over, arms crossing, music drifting out after him-- *but I can't hide the way I'm feeling* -- as they stand there together, alone. The doors clatter shut behind him, muting everything.

"What are you doing, Billy?"

"Waiting for you."

Steve wets his lips. He doesn't know what to say to that.

"Wanna smoke?" Billy asks.

Steve's throat works. He glances at the pack Billy holds out, the way he waggles it, and then back up at his face.

Outside, in the place between buildings, Billy leans against the brick and watches as Steve lights up.

"I wasn't lying," he says, when Steve's mouth is too preoccupied to ask, to accuse. "My guidance counselor really did tell me to get a tutor, just in case. Nancy's the smartest bitch around here--"

Steve makes a face at him and Billy laughs.

"Sorry," he says, but Steve doesn't think he is. "You told me to do it for me. That's what I'm doing, pretty boy."

Steve snorts. "What, you gonna show up in a letterman's sweater and quit smoking, next?"

Billy's eyes are bright. Burning.

“Only if you wear that cute little black number. Heels, too.”

Steve huffs, knocking back against the brick wall next to him, breathing out smoke as he closes his eyes. “You’re such a fuckin’ asshole.”

Billy laughs, lighting up a cigarette for himself and letting his head lull back against the brick. “Steve --”

“Don’t,” Steve winces, eyes on the burning end of his own cigarette, and then he’s dragging hard again and flicking it away, half unfinished. “I shouldn’t have come out here.”

Billy makes a soft sound, pained and quiet, and Steve looks at him. He’s got one hand shoved into his pocket, the other holding his cigarette to his lips.

Steve remembers that mouth kissing smoke from his lungs.

He looks away.

“Steve,” Billy says again, and Steve doesn’t stop him this time. “I just wanna talk to you --”

“I’m going to the Spring Fling with Jenny,” Steve says, meeting his eyes, and Billy blinks like Steve’s slapped him; the tight line of Steve’s shoulders goes lax. “Admittedly, it’s just in a friendly capacity.”

“Okay,” Billy says, short and rough, and he drops his cigarette and stamps it out with the toe of a boot. “Okay. And?”

Steve shrugs.

“Harrington,” Billy sighs, and Steve blinks as Billy rubs both hands over his face. “I had to leave. My dad -- I *had* to leave. To get my head on right. You *know* that.”

Steve’s throat works, but he nods.

“I had to leave,” Billy says again, looking at him, jaw tight and eyes wide and hands fisted at his sides. “But I came back. I came back for --”

“ *Don't .* ”

Steve feels his breath leave him. Feels his heart lurch.

Hope. Treacherous, dreadful hope.

He doesn't want it. Bright and unfurling like blossoms in spring after such a long damn winter.

Billy's jaw flexes. “Why won't you let me tell you? Why won't you let me say it, Steve?”

“I don't --” Steve shakes his head, shuffles a few steps away, arms crossing over his chest, nails biting into his biceps, eyes on his feet. “I can't.”

“Well, I'm gonna keep fucking trying anyway.” Billy snaps, and Steve looks up sharp. “Until you tell me to back off, to leave, to never talk to you again -- I'm gonna keep fucking trying.”

Steve shakes. Billy's grin is slow; tentative.

“You're so fucking fragile, King Steve. Anyone ever tell you that?”

Steve shoves him. Not hard enough to hurt, but enough to knock him against the wall as he laughs.

“Dick,” Steve says.

“Yeah, well. I wasn't gone long enough to cure me of *that* .”

Steve doesn't say anything. But he doesn't leave, either.

He thinks that says enough.

“Look,” Billy sighs, shuffles close a step, and falters. “Tell me to stop and I will.”

Steve's lips press into a thin line.

Billy's mouth goes crooked. Smile soft, easy, *sweet* . His eyes wrinkle at the corners.

He reaches out, careful and just as slow as the relief on his face, and hooks his fingers into the belt loops of Steve's jeans. He gives a little tug, not enough to force Steve anywhere, but Steve stumbles forward anyways.

"Tell me to stop and I will."

Steve's arms jerk. He braces his hands on Billy's arms -- to push him away, to pull him closer, to keep him from doing something stupid.

Billy's eyes dart over his face. Hunting, always hunting, and Steve shudders as Billy tugs again until they're flush, together, alone in that place between places.

"Tell me to stop," Billy breathes, leaning in, pressing his forehead to Steve's, and Steve's chest aches, his body quivers taut, his breath chokes him. "And I will."

Steve squeezes his eyes shut. He hitches out a little sound, and Billy echoes it, a hand coming up to curve along his jaw.

He strokes a thumb against his cheek. Their noses bump. Billy doesn't kiss him.

"Can I?" Billy asks, thumb dragging back and forth, and he's never asked before -- has swooped in and *taken* and Steve had happily *given* but now he's *asking* and --

And Steve nods. Doesn't trust his voice not to break and echo off the brick.

Billy lets out a short breath. He takes Steve's face between his palms, holds him steady, nudging at Steve's nose with his own. Steve waits for the inevitable press of his mouth, the heat of his tongue, the burn of *too much* .

It doesn't come.

Instead, there's a rough drag against his cheek -- Billy's own and then Billy's lips pressing to the flush of his face. Then to his other cheek. Then, as Billy guides his face down, to his brow. To his temple. To the place right before his ear, over the flex of Steve's jaw.

Steve's breath leaves him like Billy's landed a blow to his gut. He clutches at his arms, eyes fluttering, and Billy kisses the line of his jaw. His chin.

"Billy --"

"Tell me to stop, Steve." Billy says, mouth dragging against Steve's cheek as he trembles, mouth ghosting the part of Steve's lips. "And I will."

"I'm still going to the dance with Jenny," Steve says, instead -- instead of the million things he wants to say, like *kiss me, tell me, stop me* -- and Billy stills, but does not pull away. "And I'm still going away for spring break. For summer, too. And I'm still going to Chicago. And I'm still *so mad* at you."

Billy hums. His thumbs drag over Steve's cheeks.

"I can work with that."

"I don't trust you."

Billy makes a sound. Steve meets his eyes, but all he sees there is blue.

"I can work with that, too."

Steve swallows. "Then don't stop."

Billy's grin, for as brief as Steve sees it before that smile is pressed to his lips, is blinding.

15. I think it's gonna be a long, long time

His mom gets back just in time to take a dozen embarrassing pictures of him in his tux. He's got a daisy tucked into his lapel and a corsage that matches in hand. He rolls his eyes a lot, but he's smiling as his mother tells him to straighten up, tells him he'll be the *bell of the ball*, tells him he'll break hearts.

He hopes he doesn't break any hearts, tonight.

Jenny is just as pleased when he shows up on her doorstep. They match, the light blue of her dress complimenting the darker shade of his perfectly. Her father takes pictures of them at the front door, of Steve sliding the corsage on her wrist, of her kissing his cheek. Her mother tells him they look *perfect*.

Steve wishes it was this easy. That he could go, pick up a pretty girl for a date, and have the happily ever after he thought he'd get before Nancy Wheeler, before the Upside Down, before Billy Hargrove.

Instead, he gets to the dance feeling trepidatious. His palms are sweating, his smile feels tight, but Jenny seems *golden*. She seems *shimmering*.

She fits right in with the entire place. Blossoming and blooming.

Not for the first time, Steve wishes he could want her. Wishes he wasn't already scanning the gym for Billy's face.

But he *doesn't* want her. And he *is* looking for Billy. Because between those kisses they'd shared, Billy had promised to be here, even if Steve wasn't with him, and Steve needs to know he can *keep* his promises.

"Let's dance!" Jenny says.

Steve can't tell her no.

Steve's half way through his tenth song and his fifth dance when he finally spots him. Dressed to the nines, by Billy's standards; pressed slacks, jacket draped over his arm, white shirt unbuttoned and tie

hanging loose.

Lurking at the edges of the gym. In the shadows between the dance of lights. *Watching* .

As Steve spins Jenny out and then back close, Billy watches. As they sway across the floor, Billy watches.

Steve meets his eyes, from across the room, and finds nothing but *heat*. Sees the way Billy eyes where his hand is, on Jenny's waist. Sees the way Billy's jaw flexes as Steve's fingers curl into the silky material of Jenny's dress. Sees the way he licks his lips, mouth open after, like he's breathing heavy--

"Steve," Jenny says, and Steve blinks down at her. "You okay?"

"Just thirsty," Steve says. "Gonna get some punch. You want any?"

Jenny shakes her head, dipping away from him, smiling. "I'm good. Take a breather."

He watches as she weaves her way over to one of the other guys from the basketball team and coaxes him onto the dance floor.

He feels a little less guilty after that.

On his way to the punch bowl, he spots Jonathan over by the picture drop; Nancy isn't far. He thinks he should probably go over and say hello.

But Billy sidles up next to him as he's pouring himself a cup.

"Hey, pretty boy."

Steve tries not to look at him; tries not to think about Billy kissing him outside of this gym and promising to tell him *everything* once he gets the chance.

Once Steve *lets* him.

"Looked like you were cutting a rug out there," Billy says. "Worked up quite the sweat."

"It was fun," Steve nods, glancing at him.

As always, Billy's eyes are bright and blue on his face. His grin is lazy and slow.

He leans in. "Would've been more fun with me."

Steve bites on the inside of his cheek. "Maybe. But if that's your way of asking me to dance, it's not very good."

But Steve knows they can't. As nice as it sounds, as much as he *wants* to, they can't.

"Dance with me," Billy breathes, risks the touch of his fingers to the back of Steve's hand. "Let's ditch this place. Come dance with me."

Steve's nose scrunches up. "Billy--"

"Just like that night after the movie. In the junkyard, Bowie playing, that great fucking way you said my name right before you kissed me." Billy says, leaning closer, voice hushed; his fingers tease between the spaces between Steve's own. "Except I won't run away this time."

" *Billy--*"

"C'mon, pretty boy." Billy says. "Run away with me. Run away *with* me."

Steve's heart stops for a moment. Billy's fingers slip between his own and squeeze tight.

And Steve remembers long winter days. Remembers being alone. Remembers stuffing his hands into his pockets, just to keep them warm.

Thinks about Billy's fingers, warm and rough and thick in his, and thinks his hands wouldn't ever be cold again.

Still, he laughs, dubious and hesitant.

"I'm here with a *date* ."

Billy finally looks away, to the dance floor. "I think she'll survive."

When Steve looks too, he sees Jenny, lip locked with her dance partner, and he laughs. Billy's grinning when he looks back.

"C'mon," he says, tugging a little. " *C'mon* , Steve."

Steve hesitates.

Then, his fingers curl into Billy's.

Steve trails after Billy's Camaro after they sneak out all the way to the junkyard. It's weird, coming back here to this place again, after avoiding it so long.

But, like usual, his heart is pounding. His hands are clammy. He feels like he's about to go a round with a tire iron into the windshield of one of these cars.

Billy's climbing out of the car when he pulls in. Steve can hear the music before he even gets out.

It's Bowie again.

Billy meets him halfway across the field. He takes him by the wrist and tugs him close. Steve laughs when Billy pulls him against him to *actually* dance.

"I didn't think you were serious," Steve says.

Billy smiles, arm around Steve's waist. "Pretty boy, I've been wanting to dance with you all night."

So, they sway together there, under the moonlight and in the glow of their headlights. Billy's arm at his waist, his hand a steady weight in his own.

It's the first time Steve's felt grounded all night.

Bowie plays out. A slow guitar riff starts up; Steve recognizes it as

the Rolling Stones.

Low and crooning, Billy starts to sing along. “ *You know who I am. You know I can’t let you slide through my hands .*”

Steve closes his eyes, sinks into his warmth, pressing his cheek to Billy’s as they sway. As Billy half whispers the words into his ear.

“Say it,” Billy breathes, right against the shell of his ear.

Steve hums. “Say what?”

“My *name* , pretty boy.” Billy says. “Say my name for me so I can kiss you.”

Steve pulls back, brows pinched. “Billy.”

Billy grins, hand pressing at the small of Steve’s back, his other hand going to Steve’s jaw. His thumb drags against Steve’s cheek and they stop swaying and Steve can’t help but remember the last time they were standing here and Billy ran away from him.

“God, my name sounds so good coming out of your mouth.”

And then Billy leans in, slants their mouths together, and pulls Steve in flush. Steve curls his fingers over Billy’s biceps.

He kisses back, parting his lips for Billy’s tongue, because he’s *helpless* not to.

When they part, it’s to the sound of Mick Jagger singing and thunder crashing. Steve looks up, right as it starts to rain, and he smiles as Billy catches his mouth again.

“Steve Harrington,” Billy breathes, between kisses, as the rain falls on them, and Steve feels something tighten in his gut. “I fucking lo--”

“Stop.”

His heart is pounding. In his ears. Behind his teeth. In time with the music and with the rain.

There's a prickle of warmth, like white hot needles, all along his nape, his scalp.

Billy grunts. “ Steve --”

“I don't-- I don't wanna hear it,” Steve says, shaking his head. “I'm not *ready* to hear it, Billy--”

“Why not?” Billy asks, arm tightening around him like he's worried Steve will bolt. “Are you scared? Are you still *mad* ? Do you not feel the same way--?”

“Billy, you're a bad idea. You're the-- the *worst* idea I could ever have.” Steve says. “You're all those *just this once* and *I know betters* in my head. You're like an *exit wound* , Billy; when you touch me I feel like I'm gonna *bleed out* and like I'd *thank* you for it. And-- and you're *everything* I want, okay?”

“Okay,” Billy nods, throat working. “Okay, baby.”

Steve nods, and he's clutching at Billy the same way Billy's clutching at him. His throat works as Billy takes his face between his hands and kisses his brow, his cheek, his lips.

He tastes like rain water.

“I can wait,” Billy says. “I can wait, Steve.”

Steve's heart drops to his *toes* .

He feels startled. Slapped. Like he's been woken, suddenly from the best, most terrible dream only to find it staring him in the face.

“I'll wait forever for you.”

Soaked and cold everywhere except where Billy is touching, where Billy is holding him close and cradling his jaw, Steve feels *grounded* .

For the first time, in a long time, he feels *real* . Solid. Not *lost*.

And so, so very *stupid* .

“Okay,” he says, watching rain water drip off of Billy's nose, heart pounding and *terrified* . “Okay, Billy.”

Billy smiles, slow and sweet, in that way Steve only ever sees when they're alone. That he only sees directed at him.

And Steve *loves* it.

“I love the sound of my name coming out of your mouth,” Billy says.

Steve loves it and he's *terrified* .

And then he kisses him.

It's one of those weird spring mornings, where the sky is blue and the sun is bright, but it's *cold* . Outside and in his house, the air nipping at his toes from where they're peeking out from under the covers.

He bundles himself further, under the blankets, and huffs when an arm tightens around his waist. Pulls him closer. A hand splaying out over his belly under his shirt.

And he remembers those hands. The way they felt, in his hair, on his skin. The way they pressed him down into bed when he finally got Billy back to his place and out of the storm. The way they'd stripped him out of his wet clothes and touched him with *worship* .

He remembers the way his pulse fluttered the entire time.

He remembers Billy kissing him. Pressing his adoration into Steve's skin with each touch. He remembers knowing even without Billy saying it.

It's one of those weird spring mornings, burning cold and bright, and Steve turns over in bed and tucks close. He feels Billy's mouth press to his brow and smiles. Feels his fingers drag down his spine.

“Morning, pretty boy.”

Steve hums. “Good morning.”

And it's not perfect. Not even close.

But it could be.

Steve thinks that, maybe, with time, it *will* be.

"I could do this every day," Billy says.

Steve breathes out slow. Feels the weight of that settle over him. Accepts it. *Wants* it.

More than he wants anything.

So he says "me too" and tucks even closer, until he can hear Billy's heart, until they're a tangle. Until Steve can't tell where he ends and Billy begins. Under the covers.

Notes for the Chapter:

It's short and it took forever and it's a little... open.
But it's the most honest thing I could do for this story.

And I sincerely hope you all enjoyed it.